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The Beginning of the End: The Final Harry Potter Book Yields Two Movies

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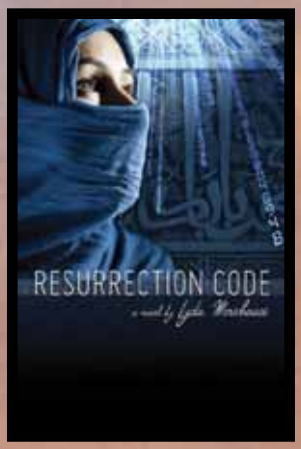

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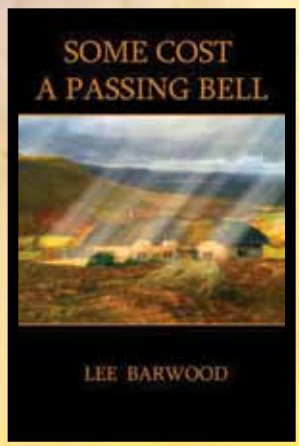

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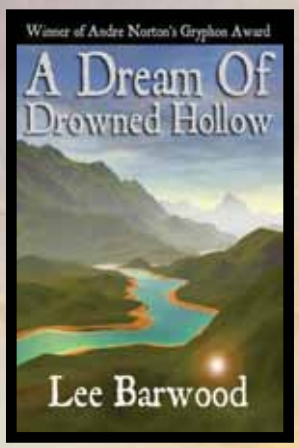

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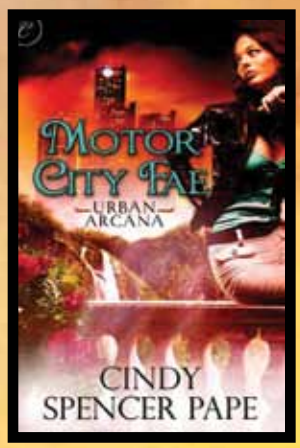

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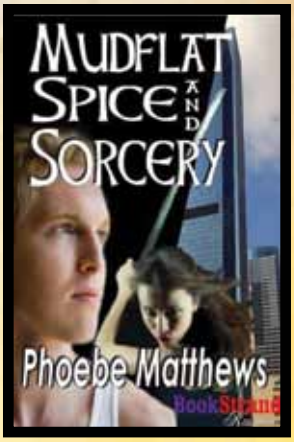

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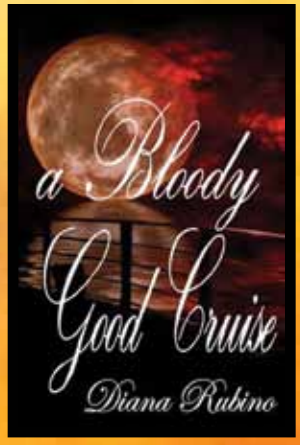

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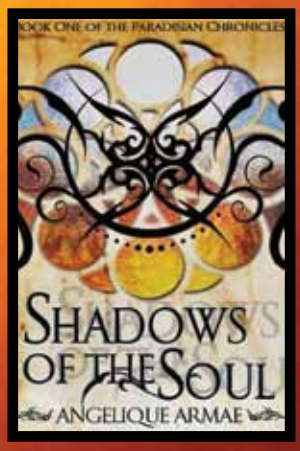

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FANTASY AUTHORS
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Contents December 2010

DEPARTMENTS

6 ADVERTISERS

8 MOVIES
by Resa Nelson
The Beginning of the End:
The Final Harry Potter Book Yields Two Movies (Part 1 and Part 2)

12 ARTISTS GALLERY
by Karen Haber
Changing Minds One Painting at a Time: A Conversation with Terese Nielsen

52 FOLKROOTS
by Stephen D. Winick
Believing in Unicorns

58 BOOKS
by Paul Witcover & Elizabeth Bear
The Third Bear, by Jeff VanderMeer, *Twelve* by Jasper Kent, *Salute the Dark* by Adrian Tchaikovsky, *Burton and Swinburne in: The Strange Affair of Spring Heeled Jack* by Mark Hodder, *Who Fears Death* by Nnedi Okorafor

65 PARANORMAL ROMANCE & URBAN FANTASY
by Elizabeth Bear
Sparks by Laura Bickle, *Dark Oracle* by Alayna Williams, *A Wild Light* by Marjorie M. Liu

ON THE WEB
WWW.ROFMAG.COM

Gaming Reviews *by Matt London*

Young Adult Fiction *by Michael Jones*

Paranormal Romance Reviews *by Elizabeth Bear*

Graphic Novel Reviews *by Andrew Wheeler*

FICTION

18 QUEEN OF THE KANGUELLAS
by Scott Dalrymple
Journeys of self-discovery can be fraught with more dangers than one can suspect.

32 THE BANJO SINGER
by Dennis Danvers
Sometimes music can soothe the savage beast. But sometimes it can only stoke its rage.

40 MAIDEN, MOTHER, CRONE
by Ann Leckie & Rachel Swirsky
If all your plans go wrong, that's a bad thing. But what if it's a bad plan to begin with?

46 TOOLS OF THE DEVIL
by Jerry Oltion
Everyone knows you can never win a deal with the Devil. But what if you don't want to?

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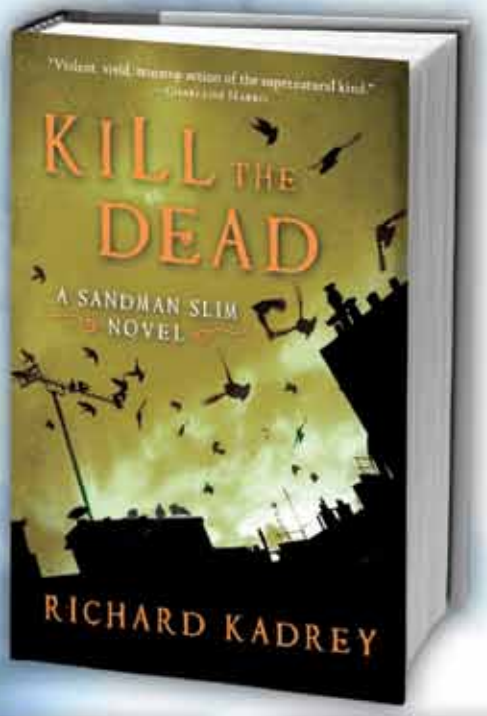

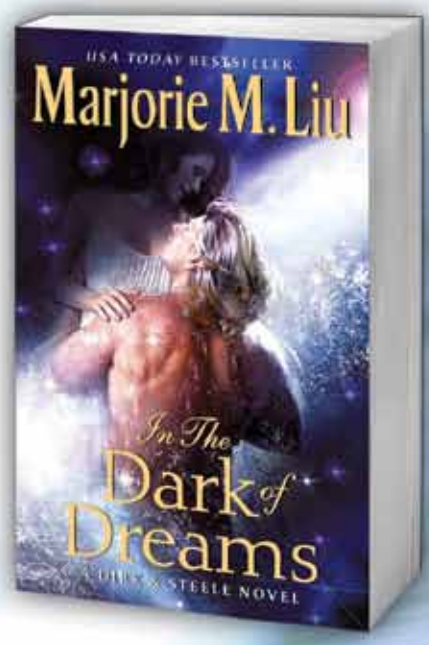

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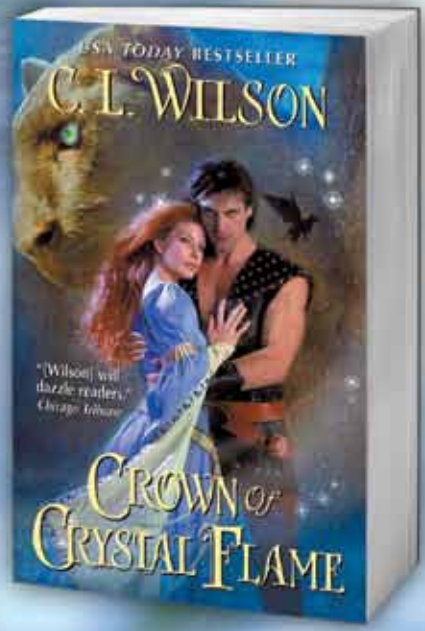

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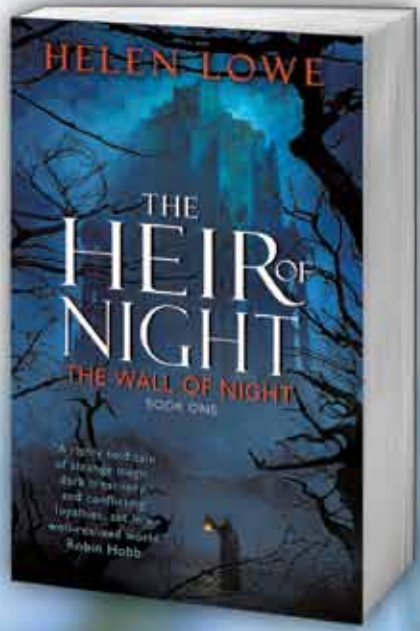

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ADVERTISERS

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Eos Books 5

Penguin Group 7, 16, 43

Kensington Books 17, 29, 39

Amber Quill Press 26, 51

Noble Knight Games 31

Alveric Yates 38

ArcheBooks 45

MonsterhedZ 51

Mundania Press 57

Fantasy Portraits 57

Tor Books 59

Galaxy Press 65, 66

Blackmore's Night 67

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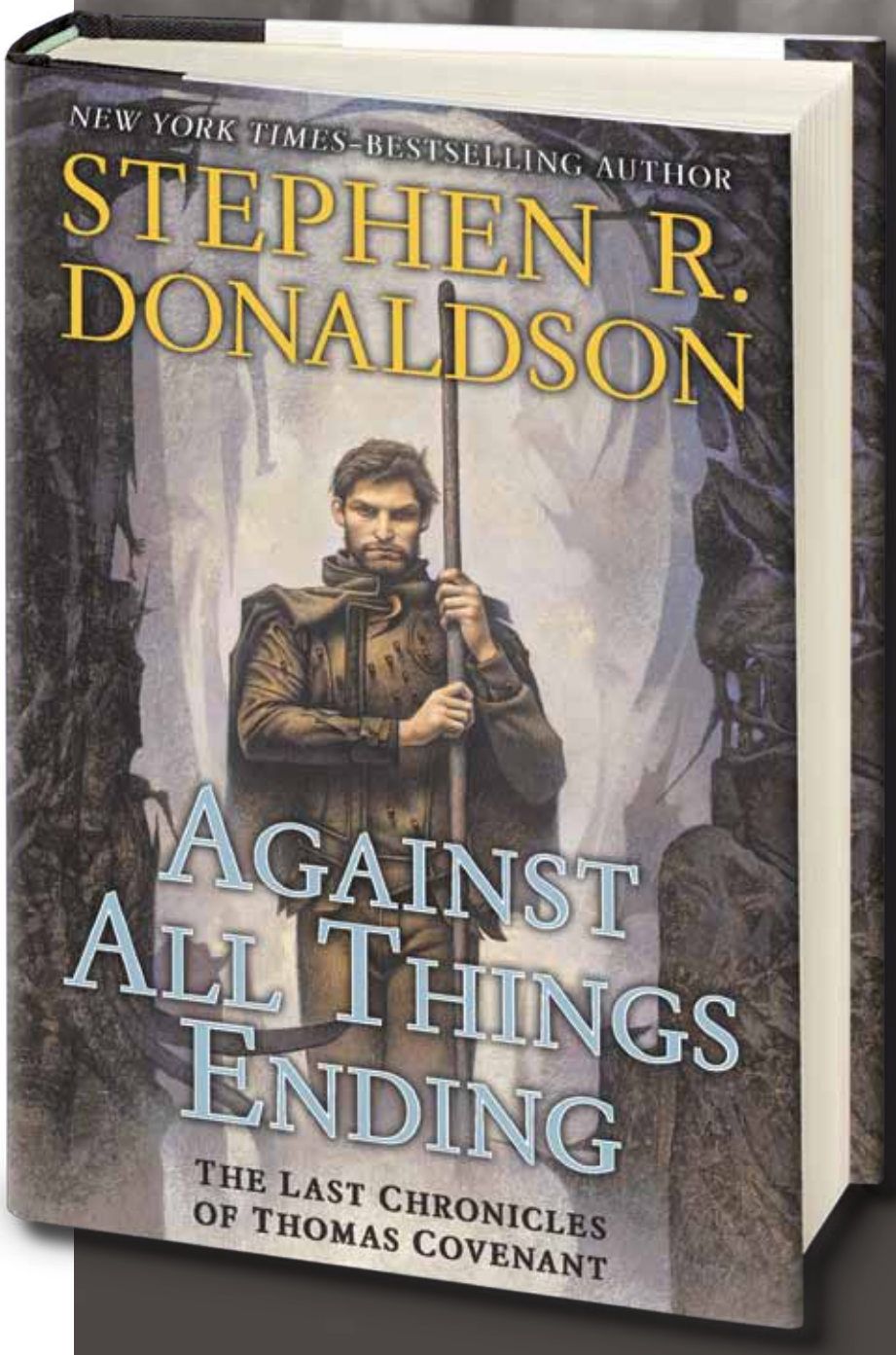
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The Beginning of the End: The Final Harry Potter Book Yields Two Movies (Part 1 and Part 2)

by Resa Nelson

DANIEL RADCLIFFE as Harry Potter, RUPERT GRINT as Ron Weasley and EMMA WATSON as Hermione Granger in Warner Bros. Pictures' "HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS - PART 1," a Warner Bros. Pictures release.

A visit to the movie set of the Harry Potter films includes the interior of the Malfoy home, where J. K. Rowling's seventh novel, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, begins. The enormous dining room features a towering ceiling and dark wood panels rising high on the walls, which look like marble. At one end of the room a pair of descending staircases flank an organ jutting out from the wall between them, seemingly suspended in midair. A working fireplace dominates the adjoining wall, and large portraits of dour-looking Malfoy ancestors stare down their noses with contempt at the people who have so rudely infiltrated their home. Tall windows made of small panes line the opposing wall, partially covered by thick, heavy drapes. But the showpiece of the room is a long and narrow dining room table surrounded by high-backed dark wooden chairs with leather seats. The atmosphere reeks of mystery and danger.

Another set features the Malfoys' basement, intended to be located directly beneath the dining room but in reality is located just around the corner as a separate set. The staircases in the background now ascend, and the focus of the sparse room is a huge iron chandelier hanging overhead. Here, the mood feels cold and foreboding.

It's a sign of things to come.

"In the sixth film [*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*] we had the sense that there was darkness within Hogwarts, dark forces coming closer to home, as it were," producer David Heyman says with regard to reviewers' comments that the movies have taken a serious turn. "We had the scene in the cave, which was a little scary, and of course Dumbledore's death, which are emotionally strong things.

"In this one [*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*], I think the threat is now out in the open. It's no longer covert. Very early on in the film the Ministry is taken over by the dark forces. Darkness or danger is absolute, and I think that is a real progression and affects everything."

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows has been split into two films, with Part 1 scheduled for release on November 19 from Warner Bros. Part 2 is currently scheduled to be in theaters next summer. Heyman and fellow producer David Barron describe *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* as being two different types of movies. Part 1 is a road movie, while Part 2 focuses on the final conflict between Harry and the evil Lord Voldemort.

Previous movies in this series start out in pretty much the same way: Harry's summer is ending, and it's time to go to Hogwarts. He often (although not always) travels by train with his friends, and they settle into their dorms and prepare for the upcoming school year, typically with some kind of mystery lurking in the wings.

Get ready for something different. Early in the film, Voldemort is stashed away at the Malfoys' home, conferring with the likes of Professor Snape. Meanwhile, Harry is essentially trapped inside the Dursley home because he can't travel magically without being spotted by Voldemort's cronies. Fortunately, the magic spell that has been protecting him within the Dursleys' walls stays intact until the day Harry turns seventeen. With a lot of help from his friends, Harry makes a daring escape and eludes Voldemort. But instead of returning to Hogwarts for their final school year, Harry, Hermione, and Ron opt to drop out, thereby honoring a secret request made by their late headmaster Dumbledore. They hit the road, constantly evading Voldemort and his minions. Harry has a lot to investigate and learn, and this time he needs to do so in the real world instead of at a schoolboy's desk.

DANIEL RADCLIFFE as Harry Potter, RUPERT GRINT as Ron Weasleyand EMMA WATSON as Hermione Granger in Warner Bros. Pictures' "HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS - PART 1," a Warner Bros. Pictures release.

Emma Watson talks about the role that her character Hermione plays in this film. Because Hermione is a brilliant student who loves school, the decision to drop out of her final year is especially difficult but necessary. "You almost wonder with Hermione that in practice or in school or on paper that she'd be very good but that actually when it came to being practical in the real world that it wouldn't quite translate," Watson says. "Sometimes when you meet very, very intellectual people they're great on paper or in exam but when it comes to speaking with people or dealing with real life, they can't really do it. But Hermione is great at both and is very practical and really the brains behind the operation. I mean, without her, Harry and Ron would just be nowhere."

In fact, Hermione opens the film by making an enormous and painful sacrifice. "Steve Kloves [wrote] a lovely scene at the beginning, which is not in the book but I feel is very important for Hermione's character," Watson says. "You see her wiping her parents' memories in order for her to start on the adventure with Ron and Harry because she obviously knows that Voldemort could try and use her parents as a device to get her in some way and they might be in harm's way for her helping Harry. So she has to wipe their memories, so they forget that she ever exists. And all of the photos of her around her house disappear and her parents don't remember who she is. It's a tough way for the film to start but obviously really important to see the sacrifice that she has to make. You see that she's really connected. She knows what she has to do, and she's totally there for Harry. She's really independent. She's a woman now. She has real conviction in her choices and her decisions. It's pretty cool."

Rupert Grint (who plays Ron Weasley) says, "It's a very different feel to any other Harry Potter film because there's nowhere safe. The locations are all relatively close to [the studio], but they're round in places like fields and forests and tents."

Watson adds, "[Part 1] has a lot more high tension, really focusing on the relationship between the three of them, the dynamic of their friendship, and what it feels like to be out of Hogwarts and on the run."

As Harry, Hermione, and Ron hit the road, their goal is to find and ultimately destroy the remaining Horcruxes that contain and protect Voldemort's soul, as revealed in the previous movie (*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*) in which the existence of the Horcruxes was explained. Two already have been destroyed. Now Harry and his friends have to find the rest of the Horcruxes before Voldemort beats them to it. As a safeguard, they keep a Horcrux they find close at hand, which has an adverse effect.

"They have the Horcrux that they wear around their necks," says Heyman. "And that also has an effect on each of them, particularly Harry and Ron in bringing out their anger and their inner thoughts. Also, their inner demons. So we see some tension between Ron and Harry.

"And of course there's the in-built frustrations. They're trying to figure out what they're meant to be doing and they don't really know. And yet Dumbledore set them this task or gave them the suggestion of something to do. Harry is following it blindly and has complete faith, and the others are following Harry because they believe in Harry. And there come points where that causes strain and tension in the relationship.

"But vis-à-vis getting darker, I suppose the films are getting more mature as opposed to darker. There are always going to be dark elements, but I don't think that's a bad thing. With *Grimm's Fairy Tales* or Roald Dahl or any books you read, most certainly as 15- or 16- or 17-year-olds…certainly, look at *Twilight*. Yes, there's romance but there's some darkness within that. I don't think that scares people away. I think funnily enough, parents tend to be more noticeable about it than children."

When Harry, Hermione, and Ron first begin their adventure on the road, they seek refuge at a few locations only to discover they soon have to leave. For example, they arrive at the Weasleys' home just in time for Bill (Ron's brother) and Fleur's wedding.

Heyman says, "And then we see the Weasley wedding attacked, ultimately, and then Harry, Ron, and Hermione realize that they're on the run, very much on the run. And we spend a good portion of the film with them on the run trying to avoid getting caught. And it's really interesting, because we're used to, by around 25 minutes in each of the films finding ourselves at Hogwarts and this time we don't. So I think that's really fresh and quite exciting. There's still magic, but I think it's really grounded in quite naturalistic settings, and I think that's really interesting."

Harry Potter fans are probably wondering what happened to the Weasleys' home, considering it was destroyed in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood*

EMMA WATSON as Hermione Granger in Warner Bros. Pictures' fantasy adventure "HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS - PART 1."

Prince. Barron answers that question. "They rebuilt it. And we did know about this before we decided to add that material [the destruction of the house, which isn't in Rowling's novel], so it was not that we burnt it out and thought, 'Oh, blast, we shouldn't have done that.' We did know. We knew that we had to apply a logic to it, which is unspoken. The bottom section of the house is brick, and that survived the fire. And there is evidence of fire damage in some of it. It's a very, very slightly different design."

Although Harry, Hermione, and Ron spend much of this movie separated from their friends at Hogwarts, they have happy moments at the Weasley wedding where they meet Luna Lovegood (played by Evanna Lynch) and her father Xenophilius (Rhys Ifans of *Pirate Radio* and *Notting Hill*).

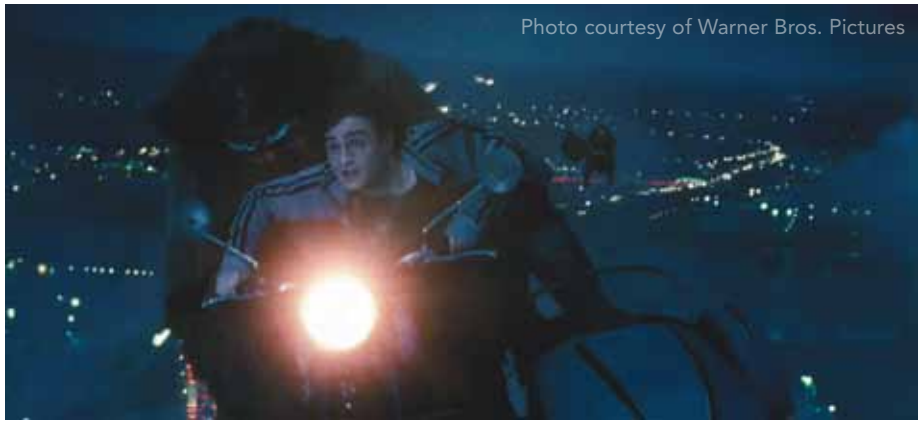
About Luna's role in the first *Deathly Hallows* film, Lynch says, "She doesn't have a very big part in Part 1 at all. She's at the wedding scene. It's interesting when you meet her and her dad together, because it all makes sense all of a sudden. I love being on set with Rhys, because we're both dressed in bright yellow. You just feel already like outsiders, and I really like that."

Later in the story, Harry happens upon evidence of how deeply Luna cares for him and his friends, which has an impact on how much he values her friendship.

"He really likes her," Lynch says about that moment in the film and its repercussions. "He's fascinated by her, I think. He just didn't understand how much [his friendship] meant to her. And she's never one to go over the top. She's just happy. She's not a person who's going to need her feelings reciprocated. I think if she wanted to call them her best friends and they didn't, she'd be happy with it because she gets happiness from that. And I love that. I think people should be more like that. Relationships can be really selfish where they're expected. She doesn't need a reason from the other person because she's so secure in herself. So I don't think just Harry knowing that changes her relationship with Harry very much. I would say that he would from then on make more of an effort and want her to know that she's as important a friend as all the others are to him."

About Ifans starring as Luna's father, Lynch says, "I'm really, really excited. Everyone says that he's so young, and I guess he is, but he was brilliant. He comes onto the set and he's sort of cool but he'll just start strolling around by himself and that's that. And I love that. Some actors, they can really intimidate you, just their presence. And he wasn't. When we were both in a scene, I felt really at home with him. Sometimes playing Luna is so much fun, but you do get the sense that people think [I'm Luna] even though I'm not Luna and they all know that. Maybe it's just me feeling I need to stay back a bit. They're all older. But with him I was relaxed. I started calling him Dad. My own dad got really offended."

Throughout the course of making the eight Harry Potter movies, the filmmakers have included author J. K. Rowling and enlisted her help. Although Heyman describes her participation as being "quite limited," it has included set visits, reading drafts of the scripts, and responding to requests for details on subjects such as wand lore. Heyman adds, "I emailed her about how old Dumbledore was because there's a slight contradiction. In one [instance] he's 150 years old, in another he's 100. So she came up with some birthdays that would be quite good. She is just the best. We sent her the script and she emailed back, and she had three notes, two of which we addressed. And the third we wrote back and said, 'We're a little concerned about this. We think it reads great, but actually if you put it on screen, it might not look as good as it reads.' When we wrote her the comparisons, she said, 'Say no more,' and we go with her blessing. That's pretty good. We've been very lucky. She understands that [the books and the movies are] different media and she's very supportive of us going on our journey."



ROBBIE COLTRANE as Rubeus Hagrid and DANIEL RADCLIFFE as Harry Potter in "HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS - PART 1."

RUPERT GRINT as Ron Weasley in Warner Bros. Pictures' fantasy adventure "HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS - PART 1," a Warner Bros. Pictures release.

As the Harry Potter series has progressed, it has attracted most of the best actors in the United Kingdom, even for small roles that offer very little screen time. When asked if the filmmakers had wanted to hire any actors who turned down the offer, Barron said, "Especially anyone who has children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, they don't dare turn down an invitation to be in Harry Potter, however brief it is. We've been lucky enough to work with the best of the best. Rhys Ifans is playing Luna's father, which is a lovely pairing [with Lynch]. But it's not a huge role. It's more of a cameo appearance. But all the big roles… Imelda Staunton, Jim Broadbent, Kenneth Branagh, all the people like that…they're all the first choice and they all wanted to do it, so we were very lucky."

Although a handful of different directors have helmed Harry Potter movies, the filmmakers decided the best course of action was to keep David Yates (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*) on board to complete the series. "The risk is always that you have four films that feel like they come from the same place," Barron says. "David Yates is definitely keen for that not to be the case. He wanted to make four different films. There's no mileage for him in terms of coming back to keep remaking the same film. Jo's stories…are very different stories. Even this last book is split into a road movie and a huge fight. So they're very different in tone.

"The benefits for us are having the shorthand that somebody like Yates now has in understanding the world [of Harry Potter]. Part of our job, David Heyman and mine, with a new director is actually making sure that whilst giving them free rein and thought, creative freedom, we actually keep them within the parameters of the world that exists because they're not fanciful films. Sometimes I think people come within the first blush think they're fanciful films because they could do anything with the visual effects and the magical world. There are very few physical restrictions to what you can do. The imagination can run riot, which is great because that's where the great vision comes from. But at the same time, it has to be within the parameters of the world that exists, because they're not one-off films. They're part of a singular story.

"The advantage for us is it's a lot easier with a director who's done it before, because there's a lot to know. I came here for the second film. By then, everyone else had already done one film but nonetheless I felt as if I was miles behind everyone else because they knew so much more than I did. [Director] Mike [Newell] said that when he started, he didn't dare look up from the desk for the first three months because the landscape is so enormous that it was a bit scary. So he picked away at it until he built his mind map of the world. And then he used that as the basis of which to build the film. David Yates had to do that for the fifth film. By the time he got the sixth, obviously he had all that inherit knowledge. And with [the final two films] it's a joy, because we don't have to explain anything to anybody because he knows it all much more than we do."

HELENA BONHAM CARTER as Bellatrix Lestrange

One question on many moviegoers' minds is how will the first part of *Deathly Hallows* end? And will there be anything viewers can look forward to after the credits have rolled?

The filmmakers promise that Harry, Hermione, and Ron will reach the Lovegoods' house in Part 1 but hadn't decided exactly how Part 1 will end (or what will happen after it ends) at the time of the set visit. Barron says, "When we know what the last frame of film is, we'll decide that. We are lucky enough having the option in post-production to figure it out later on because shooting both films back-to-back rather than having to commit to one, shooting it and releasing it, and then coming back to shoot the second means we have the luxury of ultimate vacillation. But there are several points that you could end it at, because it gives it a very different tone to the ending." There is also a strong possibility that viewers who sit through the end credits of Part 1 will be treated to a trailer of Part 2. ❧

Changing Minds
One Painting
at a Time:

A conversation with

Terese Nielsen

by Karen Haber

Not so long ago in a city not so far away, one of Terese Nielsen's teachers told her: *It's really too bad that you're such a talented woman, because as a woman, you'll never be able to have a successful career.*

Did she ever prove him wrong. Times and attitudes have changed, and Terese Nielsen is one of the artists we can thank for helping to bring about this enlightened cultural shift.

After graduation from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, with highest honors, Terese immediately began freelancing, contributing to everything from theme park design to editorial illustrations. In 1992, she entered the comic book field, illustrating superheroes for numerous collectable card sets. Soon to follow were fully painted comics for Marvel, *Ruins* 1 and 2 and *Code of Honor,* and covers for both Topps's *Xena: Warrior Princess* and Dark Horse's *Star Wars* comic books.

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In 1996, Wizards of the Coast invited Terese to paint cards for *Magic: The Gathering*. Many of her cards became players' favorites. To date she has illustrated over 140 images for the world-famous game, and now often customizes cards she originally designed.

Terese has worked for every major gaming company in the industry, painting covers for computer and video games. She has contributed imagery to the blockbuster game *World of Warcraft*. She's also been very active producing art for *Star Wars* tie-in products. Her artwork can also be seen on numerous book covers including those published by Del Rey, HarperCollins, Tor, and Wizards of the Coast. One of her favorite recent projects was *Angel Quest: Random Acts of Kindness Cards*, an interactive card game that she designed and art-directed.

She has received numerous awards, been a juror for several art shows, and for the last seventeen years has been showcased in the series *Spectrum: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art*.

Having amassed twenty years of knowledge and experience, Terese is currently developing educational materials that teach artists important aspects of technical skill, creativity, and business development. She currently resides in Temple City, California, with her partner and their four teenagers. Recently, *Realms of Fantasy* caught up with this busy artist for a quick update.

ROF: You are working with Wizards of the Coast on illustrating a *Star Wars* miniatures line, yes? Can you tell us about that?

TN: I've been painting packaging illustrations for the *Star Wars* miniatures line, beginning with the *Legacy of the Force* set, I really enjoyed painting these! They've got all of my favorite components: single figure, portraits, tall vertical format, circular motif, a suggestive but not super-detailed background, and eye-catching color. The *Legacy* expansion set features characters from the wildly popular *Star Wars: Legacy* comic book series from Dark Horse Comics, Del Rey's *Legacy of the Force* novels, and other favorite personalities from the *Star Wars* saga. I was asked to illustrate Luke in battle armor, Boba Fett and Darth Talon…all very cool characters.

Paul Hebron, the art director for this project, is an absolute delight to work with, which can make a huge difference in how much fun it is to work on a piece as well as how good the finished product turns out. I think he does an amazing job with the packaging. The description he gave me for the Luke piece was pretty minimal, which in most cases is nice and lets the artist really do what they're trained to do: *This is Luke in battle armor (from the Legacy comic*

series); he has light saber in hand. No helmet. Aggressive stance. Eye contact with viewer.

So, I had two comic book references of Luke in his stealth armor as a guide, and then went on a search for some decent face reference. After the reference was gathered I worked up the sketch to go through the approval channels, and then I started slinging paint for the final. Actually, I did all three sketches at once and submitted those. I made any needed adjustments and then went on to the painted versions.

All of the images I make for the *Star Wars* miniatures sets are all created traditionally. I do the sketch on tracing paper parchment. After it's approved, I scan it in, and print it out on Epson Velvet Fine Art Paper. I then submerge the print in my oversized sink, which is filled with water (wet stretching) and mount it to a piece of drywall for a sturdy surface while painting. My first stage of painting is always covering the white of the paper by washing in general colors and textures with acrylic. That is followed with building up the details using colored pencils and oil.

These illustrations are always created in sets of three and I've done several sets featuring different *Star Wars* characters, with more to come. I worked on this almost nonstop through 2008 and 2009.

ROF: Are you also painting comic books covers for *Star Wars* comics?

TN: I did paint a series of *Star Wars* comic book covers for Dark Horse back in 2000 and 2001.

ROF: Are you doing any other *Star Wars*-related art, and if so for whom?

TN: I was also the cover artist for a series of *Star Wars* books produced by Del Rey called *The New Jedi Order*. I was also asked by Lucas to create a limited edition print for their Star Wars Celebration IV event. The Skywalker Ranch has purchased and displays more than twenty pieces of my original *Star Wars* art.

ROF: How did you get involved with doing *Star Wars*-related art?

TN: My very first image for *Star Wars* was for a magazine called *Star Wars Insider* back in 1995. After that I was asked to do comic book covers and book covers.

ROF: Could you please share a bit about your experience in creating art for the comics industry? It can be a challenging industry. Is there any advice you would give to young artists interested in working in the comics industry?

TN: I'm a painter, so I never did the traditional "penciling" or "inking" that most comic book artists are known for. I created a few painted graphic novels. It takes a tremendous amount of time to do a "painted" comic, and the page rates were never high enough to compensate for the amount of time

needed to do a nice job. It was a good foot-in-the door, early in my career. However, I soon shifted to cover work in comics, as well as books and also superhero trading cards, back in the day when those were so popular.

ROF: Please talk a bit about your special customizing of *Magic: The Gathering* cards.

TN: These are for the "mother" of all collectable card games, *Magic: The Gathering*. Actually the very first card I was asked to paint back in '93 has also proven to be one of *the* most powerful cards in the game. Players always want four "Force of Will" cards in their deck. It's über-cool to have the artist "sign" the card, but if the artist modifies the card in any way, then that is just beyond cool. The European and Asian collectors are extremely hot for these sorts of collector items. It's a fun way to honor the fans and collectors, and it's also a nice addition to vary the streams of income in my illustration career. Sometimes I'll do a couple a week and sometimes I won't have time to do any for several months. I create them using the same mediums I use on large illustration jobs, just mini versions. I enjoy seeing how excited collectors are about them. I've always loved miniature things, so these are fun little miniature pieces of collectable art. The biggest challenge is trying to achieve a "likeness" at that size. You have to place one tiny dot of paint with pinpoint accuracy or it all looks wrong. I've been known to use a magnifying glass on some of these.

(Note: Terese and her brother, artist Ron Spencer, recently teamed up on *Magic: The Gathering* alterations. To learn more about their process: http://teresenielsen.typepad.com/photos/ron_and_terese_alteration/index.html; or contact Ron at ber5serker@hamilton.com.)

ROF: What made you become an artist?

TN: It might just have been boredom. I'd like to say that the reason I'm an artist is that I had a near-death experience, or perhaps an angelic visit, that ordained me irrepressibly to a creative destiny, but my life has probably been defined by an obsession for escaping boredom as much, or more, than anything else. The quest to soothe heated neurons has probably defined not only what I do, but how and why in every area of my life. I grew up in Nebraska. In the dead of winter, surrounded by miles of frigid Nebraska cornfield, what was there to do but to grab a pen and immerse myself in stacks of white paper that beckoned like fields of freshly fallen snow for its first footprints? Well, it was either that or War Ball and roller skating with my brothers in the basement, or creating countless costumes and action poses for our Big Jims.

ROF: What inspires you?

TN: Creating beauty is a compelling drive, and the idea that beauty helps evolve the spirit ignites me. I try to incorporate principles of beauty, harmony and balance into every illustration, even if it's some phantasmic creature for a role-playing game.

I identify with the philosophies of visionary artist Alex Grey, who says, "Spiritual imagery can give us a new world

view, a new way to interpret reality… Since the transcendent force is embedded in sacred art, it can empower us to transform the ways we think, feel, and act by awakening our own creative spirit. The mystic artist offers gifts of sensuous beauty through art while also offering a deeper gift, a contribution to spiritual growth.

And, to be honest, I need to keep it interesting. It's one reason I use mixed mediums. On any given piece, I'm likely to dip my brushes in acrylic, oil, and gouache, as well as pull out the air brush and Prismacolor pencils. If I can get away with it, I'll add in a little Klimt-induced gold leaf, and sometimes, if I'm really letting myself live, I'll incorporate three-dimensional elements like the bark from a tree or the smooth flat stones you'll find embedded in *Miriam of Magdala*, or the rusty pieces of scrap metal you'll find in the portrait of Tori Amos.

ROF: What frustrates you about the field?

TN: The greatest frustration I have in the field of art is that the rates for illustration work haven't risen to match the rate of inflation. Despite the fact that billions are now spent on advertising, the allotment for art has steadily diminished as a percentage of the overall advertising budget. For perspective, during the Depression Era artists such as Rockwell (1894–1978) could secure up to $5,000 for a single advertising assignment with which he could easily buy a house with land. Today, property taxes on a modest dwelling might almost be covered with one "high-paying" illustration job.

ROF: You have a blog and a website. What is your goal for your blog, and what kind of interactions do you have with fans and young artists? Do you blog daily?

TN: The blog is a great place to let people know what I'm up to and to share details of how I do what I do. It's difficult to respond to all of the emails, and when it comes from young up-and-coming artists, I always really want to. So my blog is a place where I try to provide more behind-the-scenes information. I also have a few YouTube how-to videos which I intend to do more of. I check the blog and Deviantart daily. I'm also on Facebook, and find that to be a really great place to interact with friends, other artists, fans, collectors, students, etc. I'm on Facebook more than I care to admit.

ROF: What conventions do you attend?

TN: My biggest convention throughout the past twenty years has been the San Diego Comic-Con. When I was interested in getting more gaming work I also attended Gen Con. Now I'm looking into a variety of other conventions and venues in different genres. I believe conventions are some of the best ways to meet potential clients and make contacts with other artists that can help you grow in the direction you're trying to go. Not only that, but when most of your time is spent painting in the studio, it's always a joy to meet the people that are interested in and resonate with your work. ❧

To see and learn more about Terese Nielsen's work, visit her blog: http://teresenielsen.typepad.com/; and her website: http://teresenielsen.deviantart.com/gallery.

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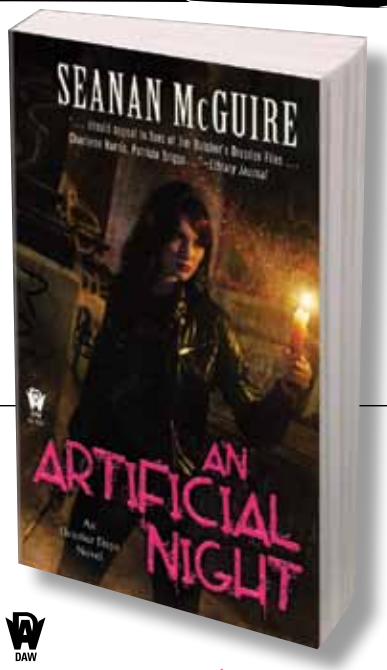
—*Publishers Weekly*



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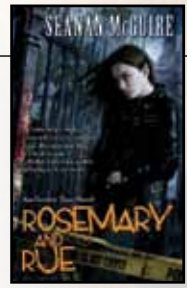

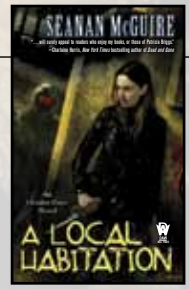

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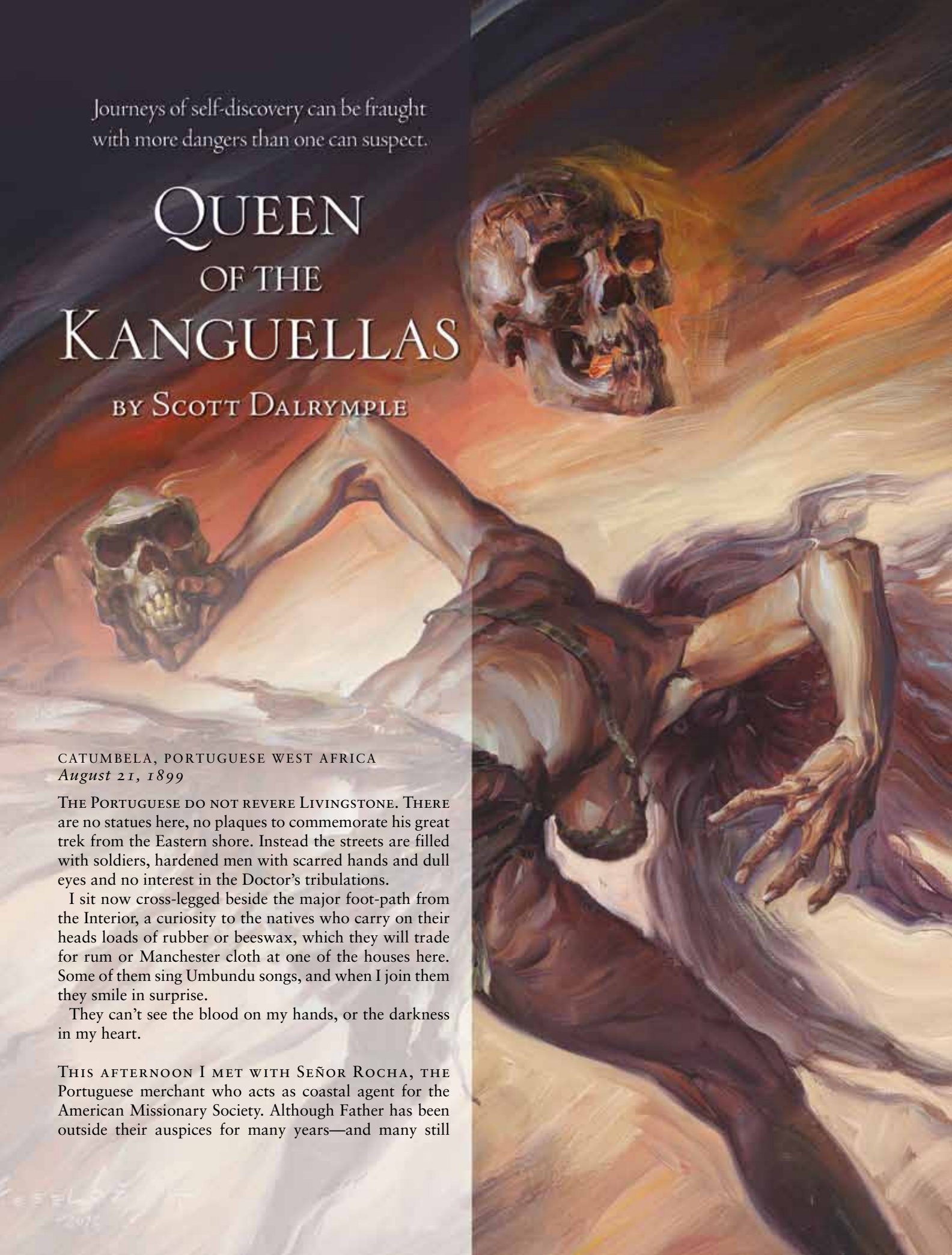
by Scott Dalrymple



CATUMBELA, PORTUGUESE WEST AFRICA
August 21, 1899

The Portuguese do not revere Livingstone. There are no statues here, no plaques to commemorate his great trek from the Eastern shore. Instead the streets are filled with soldiers, hardened men with scarred hands and dull eyes and no interest in the Doctor's tribulations.

I sit now cross-legged beside the major foot-path from the Interior, a curiosity to the natives who carry on their heads loads of rubber or beeswax, which they will trade for rum or Manchester cloth at one of the houses here. Some of them sing Umbundu songs, and when I join them they smile in surprise.

They can't see the blood on my hands, or the darkness in my heart.

This afternoon I met with Señor Rocha, the Portuguese merchant who acts as coastal agent for the American Missionary Society. Although Father has been outside their auspices for many years—and many still

Illustration by Petar Meseldžija

recall his spectacular failure—a kind official who once knew him made the necessary introductions.

Rocha is a rotund man with a taste for taxidermy. I asked if he had killed the lions, boar, and antelope whose heads line the walls of his well-kept home, but he laughed at the thought.

"No, no," he said, his yellow teeth arrayed in the forced smile of those unaccustomed to joy. "I'm not built for wilderness."

He snapped his fingers and a boy of about fifteen entered the room.

"*Moleque,* a beer," said Rocha, referring to the boy as "bondsman," which is the modern euphemism for slave. "Would you like one?" he asked me.

"Tea, if it's not too much trouble," I responded in Portuguese. "A lady doesn't drink beer at this hour."

"Of course," Rocha said. He gestured to the boy and put a fat finger to his lips, barely suppressing a smirk. For a long time he studied me, his judgment palpable. "Why come back? There's nothing for you here."

"My father," I said.

Rocha stroked a crucifix on a heavy chain around his neck, saying nothing.

"I want to find him."

Rocha frowned. "The Omoyamba station has been inactive for a very long time." He chose his words carefully, as the Portuguese often do.

I shrugged.

He gave me a look I couldn't interpret; I suspect he knows something but won't say it. "Still, I would not go so far inland as Omoyamba. These are dangerous times."

"I can look after myself," I assured him.

"Still. The government is mobilizing against the more troublesome tribes. You've noticed the soldiers."

The boy returned with our drinks. I brushed his hand and whispered some kind words but he refused to acknowledge me.

Rocha approached the petrified head of an ibex and brushed something from its nose. "The authorities are discouraging unnecessary travel to the Interior."

"I understand," I replied.

Rocha started to say something but apparently thought better of it. "Tell me what you need," he finally sighed.

I thanked him and said I required only two men.

He raised a bushy eyebrow. "Two?"

I said that would be plenty, and that we require only guns and blankets and such food as we can carry.

Rocha advocated the typical bloated European caravan, but I would have none of it. I'm to return in two days, by which time he is to have made the necessary arrangements.

August 23

There is no shortage of Umbundu-speaking men here looking for caravan work, and Rocha has presented some for my approval.

The first, Lumbo, is short and wiry and a source of constant chatter. Departing Europeans often leave unwanted articles of clothing here, and Lumbo proudly wears such castoffs, in particular a soiled waistcoat and the helmet of a London policeman. "You'll find me very useful," he claimed, gesturing energetically. "I know all of Angola. I've been all over Angola. No man knows Angola better than I. I can take you anywhere."

"Anywhere?" I asked skeptically.

"I know the way."

"You have crossed the Ujongo, then?"

Immediately he backed away.

"What?" I asked. "Surely you know the Ujongo?"

"Only fools go there," he said, shaking his head vigorously.

"Why?"

He fidgeted nervously. "It is the land of the Kanguellas."

I smiled. As children, Edward and I often sought the fabled Kanguellas, a tribe of great ferocity against which it was said that no man, dark or light, could stand.

I smiled. As children, Edward and I often sought the fabled Kanguellas, a tribe of great ferocity against which it was said that no man, dark or light, could stand. The Kanguellas were supposedly led by a warrior queen who was half man, and that neither she-he nor the people themselves could be killed by human hands. Although they were thought to reside in the vicinity of the Ujongo, I never met anyone who had actually seen them. Wherever you were, the Kanguellas were always said to be found just north of there. Father said they were possibly a real tribe that had become extinct, but thought them most likely apocryphal, the wishful invention of a people who longed to be something they were not.

Rocha, who speaks only a smattering of Umbundu, nevertheless caught the word. "The Kanguellas are a myth," he said. "A bogeyman to scare children."

I translated these words for Lumbo.

His eyes bulged in protest. "No! No! They live in dreams! I have seen them!"

I cast him a doubtful look.

"Once they captured me," Lumbo said earnestly. "They gave me a stew."

"That doesn't sound so bad," I observed.

"I did not eat it," he replied. "I went away as fast as I could, while they laughed like hyenas."

"Why?"

He shuddered, whispering, "Floating in the stew was the hand of a baby."

"In your dream?" I asked, but he would say no more.

The second man is a warrior named Katema. Though probably no older than I, he seems to have a quiet wisdom about him. I took an instant liking to him and expect no problems.

Although I had asked for only two men, there was a third present, ignored by the others. I soon learned why: he is completely dumb. He understands me perfectly well but replies only with nods and gestures. When I asked his name he merely pointed to the sky, and thus I call him Ilu.

Upon our return I will pay the men in the usual way, which is to say in yards of calico. I will wait to tell Lumbo that tomorrow we march straight for the headwaters of the Ujongo.

OLOMBINGO MOUNTAINS

August 29

We are on the Plateau, a mile above the sea. In the morning it is cold enough that hoar-frost covers the ground, and so eager are we to rise and move that we scarcely eat breakfast. We generally march without break until midday, by which time the temperature has climbed to 90°F and we are exhausted and famished. We eat and rest before marching a few more hours, then make camp for the night. Once we cross these mountains, we should be able to average well over twenty miles a day.

Much of the country between Catumbela and here is a sandy wasteland where no men live, but today we encountered a ragged village whose people live in small, conical thatch huts. They sold us corn on the cob and sweet potatoes. My companions will not stay in their village, however, because as it happens these people revere the chameleon, and Lumbo in particular finds this a bad omen.

In the Bantu mind, the chameleon is no ordinary creature. Long ago, it is said, Suku sent chameleon and frog with messages for man. To chameleon, he said, "Tell man that when he dies, he should not fret, for he will live again." To frog, Suku said, "Tell man that when he dies, he is dead. He will not live again." Chameleon and frog left to deliver their messages. Frog, being faster, reached man first. "When you die, you are dead," frog told man. "You will not live again." Man heard this message and believed it. When chameleon finally arrived and proclaimed his message of hope, man told him to go away, for the people had already accepted frog's message.

Consequently most people now despise chameleons, whose slowness cost them the promise of eternal life. Why these villagers would choose to honor the creature I can't say.

SUDONGO

September 3

The Ovimbundu say that after the Creation, each animal was tasked to plant his own tree to cover the earth. Most creatures carried out their task with diligence, and thus we have the acacia, and the palm, and the mahogany. But Hyena, the crafty one, planted his tree upside down: its sprawling roots exposed in the air for all to see. This was the great monkey bread tree, or baobab, whose trunk the arms of a dozen warriors might not encircle, and which they say survives a hundred lives of men. I sit now under such a giant.

Before me are the ruins of Sudongo village, significant because it was here that my parents met Rev. Walker, then senior representative of the American Missionary Society in Angola. Sudongo was quite an outpost of Christendom in its day, home to no fewer than six whites: Rev. and Mrs. Walker, their two young daughters, and two spinster teachers of the type that seem to sprout up in missions everywhere. It was here that my parents learned of their true assignment: the creation of a new mission station much deeper in the Interior.

Here, they must have seen the very tree under which I now sit, this mammoth, this joke of the hyena. What a marvel it must have seemed to simple folk from western Kansas, where trees are so scarce that farmers carve their fenceposts from stone.

There is little left to see here now. The works of men are gone, burned or collapsed or simply overwhelmed by the sawgrass that in time swallows everything. Only the pole framework of the mission church survives.

September 10

We negotiate passage through Kimbasi territory.

This afternoon we spied their sentries in the distance and tried to hail them, for it suits us to cross their lands. Rather than respond, however, the sentries disappeared—only to confront us an hour later with a small war party.

"Who is this entering the domain of the Kimbasi?" asked their leader. His teeth, and indeed all the teeth of their tribe, are ground to sharp points. Katema says this is because they revere the lion and wish to emulate him. Ordinary human teeth are thought to resemble those of the zebra, whom they revile.

"I am Kayela," I announced.

The men laughed. Kayela means "little white thing," the Umbundu name given to me as a girl. Normally, at age eight or ten Umbundu girls undergo the rites of adulthood, retreating to a distant camp and learning the ways of domestic life. At this time they receive their adult names, childhood names never being used again without insult. I did not participate in this rite and never reached adulthood.

"We have gifts for your chief," I said, displaying some glass beads I'd obtained in Catumbela.

Satisfied, the men took us to their village, an impressive group of huts whose number I couldn't count. Although the place had the look of relative prosperity, the villagers were unnaturally solemn, cowering as we passed through the large stockade fence surrounding the village proper.

I was ushered into the chief's hut, my companions being forced to wait outside.

The hut's interior was exceedingly dark, its door being covered by a length of dark cloth. The gentle pressure of hands on my shoulders indicated that I should sit. I did, and waited in silence.

Eventually an aged male voice said, "You wish to pass through Kimbasi land."

"Yes, wise one," I replied. "We ask your blessing. We bring gifts in hopes of your good feelings."

The chief grunted. "Who are your people?"

"I am of you, the People of the Mist," I replied—for we are still in Ovimbundu territory, the Kimbasi being but one tribe among many—"and of the whites."

He considered this. "How can one man be of two peoples?"

"I lived my first fifteen dry seasons in Angola," I told him. "The rest among the whites."

I could feel him studying me in the blackness.

"We do not deal with the whites," said the chief, "unless we have no choice."

"This is often wise," I replied. "But some whites are kind, and you would be happy to know them."

Although I couldn't see him, I could tell he was shaking his head. "I have not seen these."

I said nothing; the truth is I have seen far too few.

"You are not Umbundu," said the chief. "Yet you are not what you seem."

The sweet smoke from his pipe filled my lungs. We sat for a long, long time in the darkness; perhaps we are there still, and all that has seemingly followed is merely a figment of that smoke.

"There are great birds, larger than any man," he finally said. "Giant birds. They run as fast as the antelope, and have claws that rip open the belly of a lion. Yet they have no proper wings and cannot fly. Have you seen these?"

I said that I had.

"They do not look like birds," he continued. "Some men say they are not birds because they cannot fly. Yet they have feathers and lay great eggs as large as a man's head. They are birds. Of this I am certain; I have seen it."

"Birds need not fly to be birds," I agreed.

The chief coughed then, so violently that I rose to aid him—but the invisible hands behind me applied their pressure once again. "I think you are such a one," the chief finally said.

Relieved, I bowed my head. "Thank you."

"I will believe what my ears are telling me. You are welcome here."

"Thank you," I repeated. "My companions and I are honored by your words."

"Take caution, though," he whispered. "There is a darkness over the land. Our cattle have died. Evil spirits roam this place. Do you feel it?"

I realized that I did. I nodded.

"This is why I have acted," he said.

His words made me nervous. "What have you done?"

He leaned forward into a shaft of light just inches from my face, and for the first time I could discern his wizened features. "I have called the Mavumbula," he rasped.

At once I understood the fear in the faces of the villagers. The Mavumbula is a witch hunter, summoned for cases thought too serious for the local witch doctor. She—for those I've heard of have always been women—specializes in rooting out those who practice dark sorcery. Her power is absolute; she terrifies even the witch doctor.

We must leave quickly.

September 13

THE CHIEF HAS INVITED US TO STAY AS HIS GUESTS, BUT IF we try to leave we will be restrained by force. So we stay.

The witch hunter is not the twisted crone I had imagined, but a plump woman of no more than middle age. She comports herself gracefully, like one who still considers herself beautiful. Her long hair is festooned with crimson beads that crack softly against each other as she walks. At her waist hangs a belt of three shrunken heads, each the size of a man's fist, the souls of which the villagers believe to be her slaves. I don't know how the mutilation is accomplished, for it's not an art normally practiced here.

As a witch hunter her technique isn't apparent, except that she has a taste for local gossip. Though no villager dares speak in her presence, she often hides behind trees or outside doors, listening intently. At night she is said to search the forest for the witch's Sabbath. So far I have not seen her employ any of the theatrical tricks of the typical witch doctor.

Hopefully she will reveal the sorcerer soon and we can leave.

September 18

I WRITE NOW IN ORDER THAT SLEEP DOES NOT DULL MY memory of these strange events. Whether I believe all that I relate, I can't say.

This evening in the darkness the Mavumbula danced around a fire, seemingly entranced. An assistant pounded a drum, at first slowly, then with increasing tempo until the Mavumbula danced vigorously, eyes wide and arms akimbo. Periodically she seemed to consult the shrunken heads dangling from her waist, causing great consternation among the villagers.

She then ventured before certain huts, muttering incantations and waiting for some supernatural sign. When she reached the hut of the chief, I supposed the witch hunter would give her report. Instead, she pulled one of the awful, withered heads from her belt and brought it to eye level. She then spoke to it. "Is this the lair of the sorcerer?" she asked the head, loudly enough for all to hear. She turned it toward the chief's hut, then back to herself.

I know many tricks of the witch doctors. Much of their magic is accomplished via sleight-of-hand, or collusion, or an oft-impressive knowledge of pharmacology. It can be explained, or at least surmised. Yet I don't know by what artifice the Mavumbula accomplished what happened next.

"He hides," said an unnaturally loud voice, its pitch so low that I felt it in my chest. Some of the villagers screamed; not a few fled in terror. It seemed to me that the head itself spoke these words, though of course it must have been the witch hunter herself, via some strange art.

Feigning surprise, the Mavumbula dropped the head. As the villagers chanted, "Witch! Witch! Witch!" she dug frantically at the dirt before the chief's hut. It took only a short time for her to find something there.

"Behold the fetiche of the black sorcerer!" she cried, thrusting the horns of a goat into the air. "It is the sign. I have revealed you, witch!"

She then urged the people to rise against the old man. A few made tentative movements, but they feared the chief even now and could not muster the courage to approach. Finally the Mavumbula herself grabbed him by the throat. "This witch is the cause of your troubles," she declared. "Tear off his limbs!"

The people responded to the Mavumbula's command, their voices rising in a crescendo of confused indignation. I watched as what moments before had been a collection of reasonable individuals became a wild and vicious organism at the command of the witch hunter. I shivered. I have heard many awful sounds: a slave whipped repeatedly by his master, all the more terrible because the man received the blows in proud silence; a screaming child ripped apart by a lioness as I, the girl's playmate, watched helplessly; and, just moments before, the eerie, impossible words of the Mavumbula's shrunken head. Yet the sound of that impassioned mob chilled my very soul.

"They do not look like birds," he continued. "Some men say they are not birds because they cannot fly. Yet they have feathers and lay great eggs as large as a man's head. They are birds.

Just as the crowd seemed primed to carry out the Mavumbula's orders, someone screamed: *"Stop!"* The scream was so loud, and so unexpected, that the mob halted, stunned. I remember feeling surprised that the shouted word had been in English. I was even more surprised to realize that the voice shouting it had been mine.

"This is your chief," I pleaded, regaining my composure. "He is a wise man. You know him."

A few murmurs of agreement met my words.

"He is no dark sorcerer. Would he harm his own people? Even I, who have lived among you only a few days, can see his love for you."

A voice rose from the crowd. "But the Mavumbula has found his horns." A number of villagers nodded.

"These are the horns of some dumb beast," I scoffed. "She buried them here in the night only to dig them up again now."

"But her soul-slave has revealed the witch," said a young woman.

I admitted I didn't know how she had accomplished this trick.

The witch hunter thrust one of the heads toward me but it showed no sign of life. "Do not listen to these lies!" she cried. "Trickster!"

I searched the crowd for Katema, Ilu, and Lumbo. They had taken advantage of the confusion to regain our weapons—and though their rifles and bows would be of little use for fighting in such close quarters, my Colt revolver would if I could get to it.

"It is you who speaks lies," I said to the Mavumbula. I don't know what prompted my next words, which surely rank among the most foolish ever uttered: "I challenge you to the poison test."

The villagers gasped. The Mavumbula made as if to protest but then checked herself, and smiled. "Yes," she said. "The test will reveal you."

Moments later, the Mavumbula and I sat cross-legged on the ground perhaps four feet apart while the impassive witch doctor procured two small gourd cups, filled them with tea, and sprinkled them with poison powder. He placed one before the witch hunter and one before me. According to widespread Ovimbundu belief, only the guilty party would succumb to the poison's effects. His incantations complete, the witch doctor instructed us to drink.

Just as we were reaching for the cups, however, I touched the side of my face. This was the secret signal I hoped would save my life.

Before taking my seat, I had whispered a few words to Katema, who now played his part: whooping and crying and shooting my Colt in the air. With my adversary and the audience distracted by this sudden disturbance, I hoped to switch the two gourds undetected—for I had long assumed that the witch doctor administering the poison test somehow placed poison only in the cup of the person he wished to kill. I would respond with my own piece of trickery.

I knew immediately that my scheme had failed. Despite the clamor the Mavumbula's gaze remained fixed on me, steady and malevolent. I couldn't move without detection.

With order restored, once again the witch doctor gestured to the cups. "Drink," he commanded. There was no way out. I drank.

The poison doesn't claim its victim right away. By tradition, we would now dance until the result of the trial revealed itself. Knowing this to be my last dance, I suppose I might have entered into it with dread. Instead, I felt strangely alive, noticing details hitherto invisible to me: the lustrous silver and aquamarine beads braided into the witch doctor's long beard; the warm, sweet smell of moldy thatch on a nearby hut; the sizzling wetness of green wood on the fire. Perhaps now, such minutiae were no longer beneath my notice, being as they were the last things I might ever perceive. Or perhaps, I thought, this was merely a symptom of the poison washing through my veins.

Confident of her victory, the Mavumbula remained at first undisturbed, her own movements quite as animated as mine. Within a short time, however, I noted a marked drop in her enthusiasm. More than once she stopped dancing and doubled over in pain. Soon her breathing became labored. Eventually she dropped a staff she had been carrying, apparently no longer able to grasp it firmly.

To my amazement, she collapsed.

The witch doctor examined her and immediately declared her dead. Without emotion, he removed her belt of shrunken heads and handed it to me. "This is the Mavumbula's fetiche," he said. "It is now yours."

I made as if to refuse the abomination, but Katema rushed quickly to my side, interweaving it with my cartridge belt and affixing the whole contraption to my waist.

When I confess my crimes to Father, should I add the life of the Mavumbula?

September 21

We continue eastward.

As might be imagined, most of the talk in our little caravan revolves around the strange events in the village of the Kimbasi.

Katema's views on the matter surprise me, for I had thought him a man of sense. He believes the shrunken heads are the key to the mystery of my survival. In his eyes they contain powerful magic. When I explain that they are merely dead tissue preserved through some primitive art, he will hear none of it. "I saw one speak," he insists. "The heads were under the command of the Mavumbula, and now they favor you."

For his part, Lumbo persists in another explanation. He believes that I myself possess mystical powers, that my body somehow transmuted the witch doctor's poison and rendered it harmless. Beyond the obvious absurdity of this claim, I pointed out that in that case, the Mavumbula's cup should have contained no poison at all. This inconvenient fact he ascribes to some other, as yet unexplained aspect of my magic.

This morning he brought me a handful of mildly poisonous berries.

"Please make these berries good to eat," he asked.

"I can't do that, Lumbo," I told him. "If you eat these you will be sick."

He took my hand and placed it over the berries. "Please."

I shook my head. "I told you, Lumbo, I can't help you."

He ate them anyway, theorizing that my touch alone might have the desired effect.

He now crouches in obvious pain. Yet to him this indicates no fault with his reasoning. He posits that I was angered by his pestering and thus I refused to exert my powers on his behalf.

Such stubborn faith is common here and often difficult for outsiders to understand. Near the center of most villages stands a tree—often a wild fig—that serves as the village's fetiche tree. Here people leave offerings to their ancestors, who are thought to watch over the living. One finds at the tree's base gourds of ochimbombo beer, or plantains, or perhaps sweet potatoes. Scraps of calico hang from its branches, small strips with no practical use.

If you ask a woman why she leaves a strip of cloth in the tree, she might answer, "My mother's brother came to me in a dream. He asked for cloth." If you ask why she leaves her deceased uncle such a very small piece, she will look at you askance. "What can he do with a large piece? He is dead. This is good enough for him!" To her, this logic is entirely consistent. Thus are the demands of both religion and practicality served.

The witch doctor examined her and immediately declared her dead. Without emotion, he removed her belt of shrunken heads and handed it to me.

My own hypothesis regarding the events among the Kimbasi involves no spiritual agency. Quite simply, the Mavumbula underestimated the loyalty of the witch doctor to his chief. Seeing his kind old chief falsely accused, he allowed the cruel woman to taste her own poison. Had my own ill-conceived plan succeeded, I would be quite dead.

The claims of the talking head I can't explain so readily. But this proves no supernatural cause. The high level of tension that night, as well as the blind faith of the people in the Mavumbula's powers, suggest a case of collective hysteria. Such incidents are documented in the medical literature. Perhaps I, too, was subject to this phenomenon, and thus thought I heard a booming voice. Or perhaps there is some art which allows one to project such a voice.

There are many things I can't do; this does not make them impossible.

October 1

I lay now beneath a flat-topped mimosa, on a plain where I can see the sky, thinking about Ilu.

Four days ago he showed early signs of malaria, which steadily grew worse. I carry a small supply of quinine, but he refused treatment of any kind, simply shaking his head and stroking my hair. He then walked into the bush and never returned. I tried to find him, but even though Katema is an expert tracker he claimed to find no trail.

None here are immune. During my childhood, malaria was thought to be borne on the wind—thus its name, which means bad air—so we slept miserably, with our windows shut tight against the cool breeze. Today it's said that a certain female mosquito carries the disease; if so, I shudder to consider the hordes that feasted regularly on our family.

Yet somehow only one of us ever fell victim.

It happened when I was fourteen. One afternoon I felt a chill and took to my bed. By nightfall I was barely coherent, completely in the fever's grip. For days I lay writhing in that dizzy, semi-conscious state familiar to all who have

contracted serious fevers; those repetitive, illogical dreams haunt me still.

Despite his medical training, Father watched helplessly as I grew steadily worse. The villagers sang songs of hope and healing, to no avail. Father even allowed the witch doctor to chase away the evil spirits supposedly responsible for my condition. In my darkest hour, convinced I was about to die, he summoned Edward to my bedside. Poor Edward, so grief stricken that he might have gone mad had I not recovered. (It was well that I was the one taken ill, for he was always the more delicate, the weaker of us.)

Yet I did recover, without warning or explanation. My fever simply broke, as if it were sentient and decided its work was complete. Within hours I was back to normal, quite as well as if I had never been ill.

Father seemed somehow troubled by my miraculous recovery, the episode changing him in disturbing ways. As long as I had known him, his faith had been strong. I hold in my hands his Bible, the pages of which reveal a man dedicated to the Church, covered as they are with markings and notes in his angular, tiny hand. The ink bleeding through the thin paper creates a strange effect, like a palimpsest—the Lord's words seemingly printed over some more ancient text whose language has been lost to scholars. Yet soon after my recovery, he stopped delivering sermons, and eventually he gave up attending church services altogether despite Mother's impassioned pleas.

His rounds to the outlying villages became longer and more frequent. He would often vanish into the bush without warning, for days or even weeks. Becoming ever more African in his tastes, he discarded his proper clothes in favor of simple goatskin flaps hung on a cord—no shirt or trousers. He took to wearing a strange type of footwear made by wrapping the fresh, wet hide of the quagga around the feet. Most shocking, though, was the way he mutilated his two front teeth in the manner of the Ovimbundu of our region: aggressively filing them to create a large V-shaped gap in between.

After I killed Edward, he stopped coming home at all.

That was when Mother took me to America.

October 14

Ten days ago, as we stopped for the night, Katema spied a fire some distance away. Curious, he investigated as Lumbo and I made camp. Upon his return he was quite agitated.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Labor agents," he replied, this being the euphemism for slavers who collect bondsmen for the sugar cane, cocoa, and banana plantations near the coast.

"How many?"

"Thirty men, twelve women," he said.

"How many whites?"

He hesitated. "Three."

"Only three?"

Because his back was to me at the time, I could not see Katema's expression; but a short grunt told me he discouraged this line of inquiry. "We should go," he announced.

"When I was a child, my father often spoke of raiding slave caravans," I told him. "The whites drink too much at night around their fire. It makes them foolish and weak, easy to ambush."

"This is not good thinking," Katema warned.

"We can catch them when they are sleeping and tie them up," I continued. "And let the others go."

"This is not good thinking," Katema repeated, more firmly.

"Very bad thinking," Lumbo agreed.

"Why?" I asked. "If we are careful, they won't even see our faces."

Lumbo, more serious than usual, repeated, "Very bad thinking."

I berated the men, threatening to undertake the mission alone if need be.

Lumbo then spoke with a quiet conviction I had not expected from him. "I have an uncle," he said, as if that settled the matter.

"Yes?"

"Once he owed our chief a debt he could not pay. The chief was kind, and said, 'I will wait until the end of the dry season, then you must pay this debt.' My uncle worked hard. But the end of the dry season came, and still he could not pay his debt."

Here Lumbo paused to peer at the stars, which seem so much closer here in the highlands than anywhere else I have been.

"My uncle went to the chief," Lumbo continued, "to ask for more time. The chief was kind. But the chief must be paid. My uncle is an honorable man, so he offered his youngest daughter to the chief. This the chief accepted, and my uncle's debt was paid."

He paused, and I wondered if the story was over.

He continued: "The chief sold my cousin to the whites for rum. I thought I will never see her again."

"But you did," I suggested.

"After three years she escaped from the plantation. She walked many weeks to reach our village. When she arrived she was scarred and twisted, so that we almost did not know her. She went to my uncle's house. My uncle beat her and took her to the chief. The chief beat her and sent her back to the whites. I have never seen her again."

I considered Lumbo's tale for some time. It was not the first such story I had heard—the scenario he described might very well repeat itself here. "Still," I finally said, "I won't desert them. Help me or not, but I won't desert them."

I prepared for assault. Without words, Katema joined me; and Lumbo, presumably finding the thought of waiting alone the more terrifying prospect, soon followed.

We would have been something to behold, had the darkness not rendered us nearly invisible: Katema, with a Winchester rifle in one hand and a makeshift club in the other; Lumbo, in outline hardly larger than a child, wearing his prized policeman's hat; and me, in my European khakis with my hair tied back, wielding a Colt and a machete as the withered heads of long-dead men dangled from my belt.

We stopped thirty yards from the slavers' fire and hid in the grass.

The captured men and women were bound not in chains, but in wooden leg and arm restraints. These are constructed by pinning together twin pieces of mahogany, each about eighteen inches long. Through the wood are small holes just large enough for the ankles or wrists of men, or women, or children (for they come in different sizes). The leg shackles allow only short, painful steps, making it impossible to run.

One of the slavers slept by the fire. Two others sat nearby, drinking and reminiscing about some whorehouse in Lisbon. They paid no heed to their captives, who would long ago have discovered the futility of attempted escape.

We waited for these two men to sleep before enacting our simple plan. We were to creep until each of us stood above a sleeping guard, whom we would strike and render unconscious. We would then bind the guards and free the captives.

As we moved closer to the firelight, I could see Katema's face. He seemed completely transformed from the agreeable man with whom I had been travelling. His nostrils were flared, his upper lip curled in anger. He walked with his head slightly cocked, like a ram poised to crush the hardened skull of an opponent. I motioned for him to remain calm, but he seemed not to see or hear anything but his objective, still ten yards away.

At this point everything unraveled. Some of the captives noticed our approach and began to talk among themselves. We waved our arms frantically in order to quiet them, but their mumbling grew until we feared the guards might wake. We sprinted the final few feet and raised our weapons to strike.

Just then, a gunshot cracked open the night. The guards woke, confused, and I stood frozen, more startled than I care to admit.

It was initially unclear whence the shot had originated, or whether it had struck a target (it had not). A disembodied voice commanded us to stop. Convinced in my panic that we were surrounded by the Portuguese army, I dropped my weapons.

It took some time for the guards to understand what had happened, and still more time for me. Only when a surly Ochimbundu man took my belt—careful, I noted, not to touch the shrunken heads as he tossed it into the weeds—and bound my hands did I realize that we had naively considered evil only a white man's disease.

The guards argued for hours over whether to kill us or take us to Catumbela, where the men would be sold and I would face charges for assaulting Portuguese citizens and restraining legal trade. Ultimately it was the potential value of my companions, and no moral compunction, that kept us from being shot and left in the grass to rot. That they

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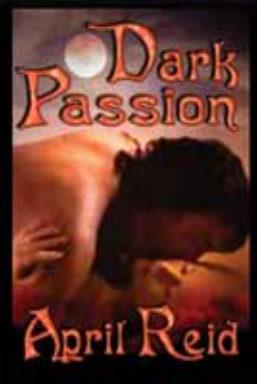

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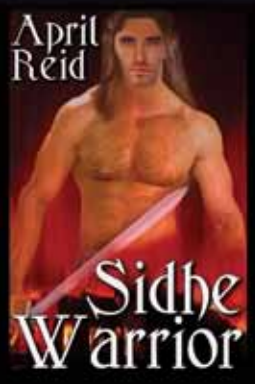

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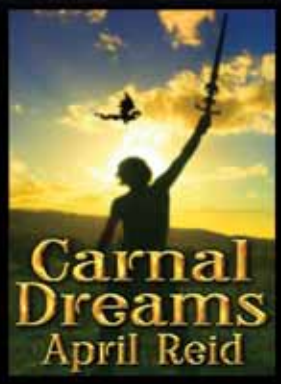

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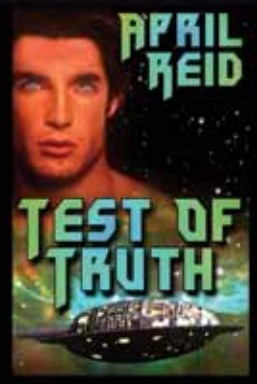

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never considered killing me alone I can only attribute to their lack of creativity.

At dawn we began the westward journey back toward the coast, Katema and Lumbo having been whipped to the point of exhaustion despite my screams of protest. I was spared that indignity, though the men guarded me closely and said if I attempted escape they would most certainly shoot me, white or no.

For six days we moved across the Plateau, marching inexorably westward. Our progress was slow despite the daytime removal of our leg shackles, which had left most of the captives' ankles bloody and infected. I begged the guards to allow me to attend them, prevailing only after pointing out that healthy specimens would fetch more than sick ones. I cleaned and dressed the wounds as best I could with the caravan's meager supplies.

The guards limited talk during the day's march. At night, however, placed in our wooden shackles, we could speak quietly.

A lovely woman named Katumbo asked where my plantation was.

"I have no plantation," I told her.

She considered this before replying, "It does not matter. I would still rather work for you than these dogs," indicating the Portuguese.

"No, you misunderstand," I said. "I was not trying to steal you. I was trying to free you."

But she simply smiled, mumbling about how generous I would be.

The man beside her said, "You would make a better master."

"But I do not want to be your mistress," I protested.

They would hear none of it. The Ovimbundu have a way of ignoring words and thoughts that do not correspond to their view of reality. No matter what I said, my new companions merely shook their heads and smiled, as if to say they knew my secret truth and would not tell. They refused to believe that I would risk myself to free them from captivity, or that anyone would. Moreover, many of them appeared utterly resigned to the thought that I might have prevailed and enslaved them in place of their current captors.

I was perceived as simply the lesser of two evils, collectively unavoidable.

We had a scare a few moments ago, when Katema announced that we were being followed. I felt certain it was the slavers, but it turned out to be merely another addition to our growing entourage.

In my (as yet unfinished) account of our captivity, I find that I have painted a too-bleak picture of the Ovimbundu. I have failed to convey the great loves, the great loyalties, the great joys of which these vibrant people are capable. Their natural state is to smile, unless life demands otherwise; and sometimes to smile even then. They value their freedom as much as any people do, but accept defeat too well. When I rail against the evils that exist here, both inside and outside the tribe, it is as one who knows the best of which these people are capable, and the worst.

Father often said that emotions are magnified in Africa. Love, anger, boredom, cruelty...all burn with more intensity here. Those who live in colder climes believe they know the human heart. But they see as through a milky lens, discerning only the vague outline of the actual thing.

It was during our sixth night of captivity that I felt a hand upon my arm. Always a light sleeper, I woke instantly.

At first I thought I must have dreamt the touch, for my fellow captives seemed all to be asleep, as did the guards. Then I felt someone fumbling with my shackles, followed by a cool sensation as the perspiration around my ankles evaporated.

It was Ilu.

"Where have you been?" I asked, but he soon vanished into the darkness.

I crawled to Katema's side. It took some time, but eventually I was able to use my discarded shackles to pry open his.

"How are you free?" he whispered.

"Ilu freed me," I said.

"Ilu?" he asked.

"Ilu," I repeated.

He looked toward the sky, seemingly perplexed. "How?"

One of the guards stirred in his sleep.

"We must free the others," I said.

Katema pretended not to understand me, but as my Umbundu is as good as his, the ruse failed.

"After Lumbo, we should free the man next to you," I said. "And that one, there. They are strong. More than that and we risk waking the guards. Together we can overpower them."

"This is not good—"

A guard rolled over, whispering in his sleep.

"Katema, we have no time to argue."

Though still hobbled by the beating he had received, Katema managed to free the men I had suggested, along with another of his own choosing. I had no plan save the obvious: to overpower our guards—which we now knew to be the three Portuguese plus the Ochimbundu traitor—before they could wake.

I could see Katema only as shadow, pointing in various directions, presumably for the benefit of the others. When he moved we all moved, with the swiftness of the desperate.

It is difficult to describe events that occur in darkness. All I know for sure is that I cudgeled one of the guards with my shackle. I could hear sounds of violence nearby, along with the confused cries of the remaining captives, who, for the second time in recent nights, awoke with no understanding of the sudden chaos about them.

We take only short breaks today, for we must outpace the slavers, whom we left bound to a tree. It's possible that the lions will find them come nightfall, but if they free themselves beforehand they will certainly pursue us.

October 20

Far north of here, it is said there are ancient churches carved deep into the land itself, ornate earthworks built inside great square pits, their roofs at grade with the surrounding terrain.

I behold now their inverse: towering cathedrals of earth with spires reaching twenty feet into the sky, their arches and buttresses things of complex beauty. Yet these marvels are the works not of man, but of the lowly white ant; and spectacular as they are, they are quite commonplace. While I cannot help but admire these natural temples, they strike me also as prisons, for somewhere deep inside each is a queen, the colony's most valued member but also its captive, her bloated body unable to leave the chamber her supplicants have lovingly created for her.

How well I understand. My new companions are all members of the same tribe, having been sold into slavery by their chief, like Lumbo's cousin. They cannot return to their former lives, and find in their freedom both elation and terror. As their liberator I am (in their eyes) now responsible for them. I aspire to no such role. They see me as someone I am not. Should I tell them?

I will fail them all.

October 30?

Some days ago I was stricken with fever, no doubt a relapse of malaria. My friends made a shelter and cared for me with great tenderness, but for me it was a week of incoherent misery.

I saw Ilu and the Mavumbula in my fever dreams. Here it was the Mavumbula who was silent and Ilu who spoke.

"Go home," he said to me, his dark eyes pleading.

"I am going home," I replied.

"Turn back."

The Mavumbula pointed, and somehow her finger reached all the way to the ocean in the West. I don't know how to describe it.

"Go home," Ilu said. Over and over without end I dreamed this scene, and each time his words pained me anew.

"I am going home," I protested.

"Go home."

Ultimately I defeated these dreams, as I did when I was young. I was always the stronger of us; Edward would no doubt have succumbed.

November

Today in the forest we encountered a mad Belgian. His name is Lemaire and he claims to have lived on this spot for twenty years. I do not believe him, for one simply does not find hermits in Africa.

He speaks excellent Portuguese, though most of what he says is gibberish. He showed me a small pile of dust which he imagines a great treasure.

"What is it?" I asked.

"You know of the Kobantu?" he asked me.

I nodded. Old Kalipa, the eccentric chief of Omoyamba village, had told me tales of them, tales that were confusing and often contradictory. The Kobantu were a secret society of sorcerers formed by Suku at the dawn of time, or else four hundred years ago when the white man first came to Angola, depending on the tale. They were said to possess a powerful relic which they never kept in one place—carrying it all across Africa, remaining constantly in motion.

"Always moving," Lemaire whispered. "Hidden behind a curtain the color of blood."

"What?" I asked.

"The fetiche that grants eternal life!" he cried, his eyes wide with passion. "The Kobantu stole this from the cannibals on the coast."

I hesitate to write these meaningless words, but he made me promise to tell his story, and I keep my word even to madmen.

"I was younger, and violent. Do not judge me."

I said I would not.

"I had to see it," he said, stroking his long beard nervously. "For eight years I sought them. At times I feared they were only a myth. Eight years."

"Were they?" I asked.

"What?"

"A myth?"

"No! One day, in this very place, I saw them, as I see you: four robed men carrying a curtained platform, just as I had imagined it! Oh! I approached them. I asked to see the relic. They refused. But I had searched for eight years! I pleaded with them. But still they refused. Oh! How could I be refused?"

I asked what happened next, though I imagined I knew.

He bowed his head. "Even a sorcerer cannot stop a bullet," he said. "Oh!" he cried, seemingly in pain. "I could not help myself! The secret was before me! I opened the curtain."

"What did you see?"

He leaned toward me like a fellow conspirator. "A strange mass, the size of a man's head," he whispered. "The outer layer: mud. I peeled this back to find an older layer: bark! Beneath that: leaves! Older still. Many layers."

"Is that all?"

"At the center I found this, in two halves." He indicated a crude, hollow wooden sphere, inside which was the dust he had shown me before.

"I see," I said, but I fear my tone conveyed my skepticism.

Lemaire appeared as if he might lunge at me. "Do not mock it!" he commanded.

I tried to appease him. "I'm sorry," I said, and I was.

"I took it back to Brussels, to a man of Science. He examined it under a microscope. Do you know what he found it to be?"

I shook my head.

"Guess!"

I said I was sure I had no idea.

"The cannibals on the coast?"

"I'm sorry."

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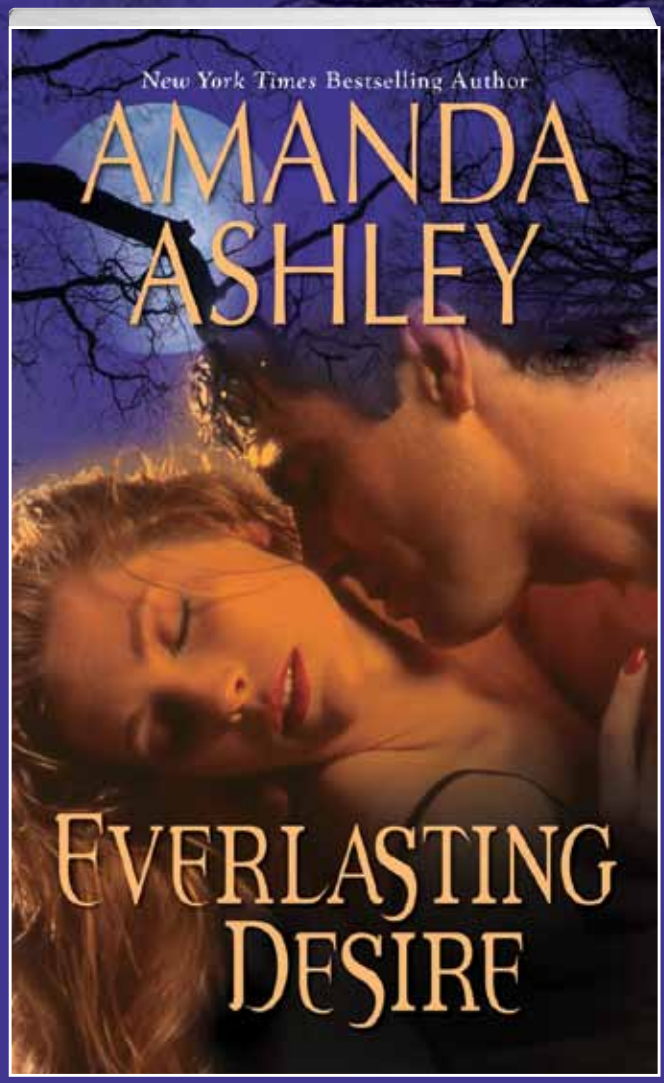

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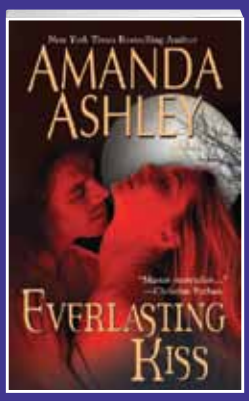

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"Wheat starch!"

I did not understand, and admitted as much.

"Wheat starch! Don't you see?"

I shook my head.

"Four hundred years ago, the missionaries land on the Western shore—how terrible in their great ships! Eat the Body of Christ and gain eternal life—how barbaric! Cannibals! So what do you do, eh? Kill them! Take their most powerful fetiche! The Body of Christ!" Lemaire laughed uncontrollably, a strange laugh that made my companions visibly nervous.

"So you returned here?" I suggested, hoping to calm him.

"To seek God's forgiveness. Someday He will come for me. I have His fetiche! His fetiche!"

We would have camped in that forest, but I wished to get as far from the Belgian as possible before nightfall.

November

Today we found a village situated at the edge of an immense, deep depression whose walls form a perfect circle nearly a mile in diameter. Clinging trees and vines obscure its sides, yet the round shape remains clearly evident. I had heard that the Earth contained such scars; no one knows what causes them. They could not have been dug by man, for the scale is simply too impossible. The people here claim that Suku became angry and hurled a great stone at this place, thus creating the massive bowl. When I ask the obvious question—what became of the stone—they of course have no reply.

The men here are large, as large as Ilu, their chests scarred with ceremonial welts. Just as the Kimbasi file their teeth to points, and certain tribes cut a V-shaped notch in their incisors, so do these people mutilate themselves: in their case by cutting the front teeth in half horizontally. Among them I feel ugly, like a horse.

Years ago, a young missionary couple lived here until both succumbed to blackwater fever. The chief showed us their grave, which he has dutifully marked with a small wooden cross. Despite this pious symbol I see no evidence that the people here have converted. (But then that rarely happens. Even Dr. Livingstone, as devout a man as ever walked the Earth, converted a grand total of one man to the faith; and as I understand it that man later recanted.)

The missionary couple had brought with them a magic lantern, and this evening the chief insisted we stay and observe its wonders. He made a great show of lighting the lamp's oil with a match, the striking of which brought forth appreciative murmurs from my companions, most of whom had never seen one. The lantern's images were projected on a white sheet draped over a rope.

I have of course seen magic lanterns before, but never in Africa, and it was fascinating to observe the reactions of the audience. The collection of images brought by the missionaries included standard fare: animals, landscapes, and architecture for the most part. Popular were the likenesses of animals, for which the villagers hooted and clapped in delight. (The highlight of the evening was the photograph of a fierce leopard, which prompted more than one child to cry and caused a woman from our party to run screaming into a nearby hut. This sent the crowd into paroxysms of laughter.)

Other images, however, elicited little or no reaction, either from the villagers or from my travelling companions. A photograph of the Acropolis prompted only blank stares, as did others of the Pyramids at Cairo. I can only presume that without context these images seem to them mere abstract shapes; the thought that these might be the products of human hands doesn't occur to them.

I know we are near Omoyamba now, for I recognize the general geography; but I'm embarrassed to admit I have lost my way. Katema speaks with the chief, who seems to understand what we seek and gestures enthusiastically to the North.

Lumbo protests that he will not venture so close to the Ujongo, but I assure him that no harm will come to him, and he seems appeased for now.

Date Unknown

Dread consumes me. For the first time I fear that Father may be dead.

I dreamed of Ilu and the Mavumbula again last night. Though neither spoke, it was clear that they wish me to turn back.

I would heed them and return now to Catumbela, but Katema reports that Señor Rocha made him promise to take me all the way to Omoyamba. Why Rocha would ask this I don't know, but Katema is adamant.

Date Unknown

This morning, when I was the only one awake, Ilu came and told me a story.

There once was a woman who railed against God. She was a lonely woman, for her parents and all of her siblings had died. Her husband had died too, as well as her seven children. When she grew old she expected to join them—but one day, when her strength seemed just about to fail, she began to grow younger again. This continued until she was once again a young woman.

She cried out to God. "Why has this happened to me? What have I done? Why take away my parents, and my sisters, and my husband and children, then force me to relive my wretched life alone?" But God did not reply.

She resolved to find Him and demand an answer. She built a great ladder to Heaven, piling the largest trees in the forest atop each other. But just as she seemed about to reach the Sky, the older trees at the base of the ladder rotted, and the whole thing collapsed.

Undeterred, she wondered if perhaps God resided beneath the ground, whence the flowers came. She dug a pit, so deep that its discarded earth formed the great Plateau. Just as she seemed certain to reach Him, however, God sent the rains, which turned the hole into a massive lake.

The woman then set out to find God at the horizon, where some say He resides. For years she walked toward the place

where Earth meets Sky, all the while saying, "I will have an answer. You cannot hide from me." Then one day she reached the end of the Earth. As she prepared her evening meal, she considered what she would ask God the next morning, when she would finally demand satisfaction.

In the morning she died of exhaustion.

Such was Ilu's tale. I told him that had the woman only been a bit stronger, she might have succeeded; but he merely shook his head. I said I had expected better from him and made him go.

I myself set out alone this morning to find God, but Katema and Lumbo soon found me. They insist we march on.

OMOYAMBA

We are here.

Like Sudongo, this place is abandoned and in ruins, the people dispersed to places unknown. The few structures whose skeletons remain are much smaller than I remembered.

I did not necessarily expect to find Father here, for I imagined him off exploring somewhere, perhaps at the thundering falls of Mosi-oa-Tunya, or Mozambique, or the Island of Zanzibar.

Yet just outside the village, on a little knoll where Edward and I used to play, was a small hut I could spy only when looking from the corner of my eye.

Inside on a bed of thatch lay a weathered man, his skin the color of rusted iron.

"I have been waiting," he said, "for so many years."

"I'm sorry, Father. I couldn't come sooner."

He smiled. "No matter. You have come. It was important to come."

I had imagined this moment a thousand times, yet I found myself simply blurting out my confession, without preamble. "I killed him," I cried. "No one believes me, but I did. I killed Edward."

Father showed neither anger, nor pain, nor surprise. He merely stroked my cheek tenderly.

"You don't understand," I said. "Do you hear me? I killed Edward."

He led me outside, where the sky now glowed with the otherworldly light that calls the storm; soon it will rain all over Angola, an unstoppable deluge.

The grave he showed me had been tended with great care, the large, sturdy wooden cross seeming as if it might withstand the onslaught of centuries.

"I have kept it for you," said Father. "I knew you would return."

I knelt before the grave, weeping.

"There was nothing you could have done," Father said. "Do you understand that?"

"No," I whispered.

"She loved you."

"Stop," I begged.

"No one lives forever."

He placed a hand on my shoulder, but it was not the strong hand of the father I had known and I pushed it away.

"You were her comfort," he continued. "Fever is not the worst death. She died in a dream sleep."

"Stop."

"You were a wonderful brother to her."

"Stop."

"Say goodbye to her, gentle boy. Allow your sister to rest. Please, Edward. Live. She would want it."

At these words I became enraged and would have struck him, but when I turned he dissolved into the wind.

Rainy Season

Here at the headwaters of the Ujongo we have formed our own tribe, which reveres the frog above all creatures. We mark our lives by the sun each day and the rain each year. Intermediate spans of time do not interest us.

Among us there is no mention of Suku, or Nyambé, or Chukwu, or any of the other names for He Who Besets. We have no witch doctor, for we believe in no things supernatural. Ilu and the Mavumbula often come and ask to join us, but the heads always counsel me to send them away.

Today I was given my adult name. My front teeth were removed with a ceremonial axe, and I am beautiful. Now before me are men brandishing rifles and spears, and as they brandish them they shout to the sky, and as they shout to the sky they call my true name, and the name that they call is Kangaya.

And the country trembles, for it is the name of the Queen of the Kanguellas. ❧

Scott Dalrymple is Dean of Liberal Arts at Excelsior College in Albany, New York. He is the author of numerous works of nonfiction, as well as short stories in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. He became interested in Angola while researching the life of Frederick Creighton Wellman (1871–1960), the eccentric father of Manly Wade Wellman, a World Fantasy Award-winning author born in his father's Angolan mission hospital. "The Mavumbula, the wandering secret society of sorcerers, and the mad Belgian were all real," Dalrymple says. "As for Ilu, who knows?"

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The Banjo Singer

by Dennis Danvers

Sometimes music can soothe the savage beast. But sometimes it can only stoke its rage.

Illustration by Andy B. Clarkson

Marie's father was a large man with hands square and flat like coal shovels. He owned the music store where Marie worked—like her dead mother before her. She was a quiet girl, slim and slightly bent like a young tree planted in the way of a tireless north wind, but stronger for it. There was something discomforting in her gaze if you looked her in the eye, and so Marie rarely looked others in the eye, not wanting to make anyone uncomfortable.

Afternoons she helped her father among the tubas and piccolos and banjoes and violins and thought them all of no real importance. Wood tubes, bent brass, strung wires, and cat gut—they were dead things. She wanted to be a singer. She was a singer. She wanted this all her life, though few had ever heard her sing. Even at birthday parties or at Christmas when everyone sang, she always busied herself doing something else. In church, she never voiced the words, for she knew if prayers were answered, her life would be quite different altogether.

Marie sang whenever she was alone. The store had an enormous collection of old sheet music, and she loved learning new songs. Once when her father went to Missouri for a funeral, she sang all day and all night, the entire time. She stood up straight and breathed deeply, smelling the dust and the brass polish. The shadows contained hidden listeners to whom she sang as beautifully as she could until her heart ached with the effort, until they were weeping, laughing, falling in love, shouting *bravo!*

Once there was a rose, thrown by one of them. It frightened her, and she left it in the dust and claimed to know nothing of it when her father picked it up, cursing when he pricked one of his huge fingers and dripped blood on the floor.

As she cleaned it up, he rehearsed a familiar theme: "You should master an instrument. We have them all here—all the very best—all you have to do is choose. What do you say?"

She kept polishing the bloody floorboards. Her father had mastered the cello. You could hear him subduing it nights when he came home from the local tavern. The bell rang, and her father left to wait on a customer, muttering curses to himself, still dripping blood.

A week later, he laid his huge hands on her shoulders and told her she was signed up to learn the banjo from his friend Garver Williams, and there would be no argument about it. He took down the finest banjo in the store. On the fret board and headboard, mother-of-pearl hummingbirds hovered silently, but the colors were all wrong. Marie watched hummingbirds outside her window when the trumpet vine bloomed—they were green with crimson throats—nothing like these hard shiny things—pale and iridescent and still. He hung the banjo around her neck, and she drooped under its weight.

"How does that feel?"

She stared at the silent hummingbirds and said not a word.

Her father cursed and left her with the banjo still pendant to her neck, iridescent eyes staring back at her.

Marie applied herself to whatever she did, and in no time she had learned to play the banjo well enough, and with six young ladies who were also Mr. Williams's students, formed Garver's Banjo Band. The band was a silly idea—seven pretty girls strumming and smiling, Garver busily picking to make them sound better than they were—but people like silly ideas. The band played all the popular tunes of the day. They gave concerts in the park and were invited to play at picnics and dances. Much to Garver's surprise they were asked to play on the radio for real money. They were so successful Garver hoped to quit teaching and concentrate entirely on managing and directing his band.

But when they played on the radio, people complained they had no singer. The banjoes were nice, but wouldn't they sound better with a singer? Garver realized no one could see how pretty the smiling girls were on the radio, but a pretty voice might also speak to the heart. So one day at practice, Garver lifted the banjo off Marie's neck and asked her to sing while the other six played. Garver had heard her sing once when she thought she was alone, only a few notes from the back of the storeroom as he slipped in the front door, but he never forgot them.

The next day she sang on the radio, and that changed everything.

Six or seven strumming banjoes—it doesn't make much difference—but her *voice*, her voice was exquisitely beautiful. Garver Williams told her she had the most wonderful voice he had ever heard, and his heart ached with how true it was.

Even she had never known how beautiful her voice was until she sang on the radio. It became real, and to make it even more real, Garver brought her a wax recording a technician at the station had made of her, and whenever she had the chance, she would listen to it and marvel. "That's me. That's really me."

The people in the shadows would smile at her and smile at one another, for they'd known it all along, believed in her always. They spoke of it among themselves, reminisced, while Marie rehearsed and sang and sang some more and was happier than they'd ever known her to be, as if she'd become a new person, and in this, they rejoiced.

The station manager told Garver his band could play every night, "just so long as that girl sings." Garver signed the contracts with a few staccato strokes of his fountain pen, and he was so excited he forgot to put the cap back on, and it made a big black stain over his heart. He laughed and called it his lucky shirt and wore it under his fine suit coat whenever Garver's Banjo Band performed—which was every night Marie wanted to sing, which was every night that ever was.

Because she knew what he would say, Marie hadn't told her father she was going to sing on the radio, so when her voice came out of the speaker in his workroom, loud and strong, it was a complete surprise to him. He dropped the trombone he was working on and bent the slide. It lay there until the end of the song, when the announcer said

it was Marie, said her name right out on the radio, and he let out the breath he'd been holding. He picked up the bent slide and crumpled it in his hands like it was a piece of sheet music, told the people waiting that he couldn't fix it, that he had to order another one all the way from Kansas City. Then he went straight to Garver, and he was so mad by the time he got there, folks said he was hollering in the streets.

He shook his big fist in Garver's face. "What do you think you're doing, Garver? Why is my daughter singing on the radio? Did anyone bother to consult *me*—her father? Did anyone stop to think I might not want a daughter of mine singing on the radio like a night club singer? I forbid it."

The next day, Garver took Marie aside before practice and told her she couldn't sing anymore. They stood in a small cloakroom that smelled of perfume and powder from all the young ladies' coats and scarves, and the light was dim and dusky.

"I must be able to sing," she said, and cried against his chest. "Please, Garver," she said. "Please," and she looked into his eyes.

Garver Williams was not a young man, and even when he was, he'd never had any luck with women. He always felt foolish and lost his nerve, so that other men more confident and aggressive would steal women away. Looking down at the young and pretty Marie, who clung to him and told him he was her only hope, moved Garver deeply, and he took her in his arms and kissed her. "I love you," he said. "I have always loved you. Marry me, and I'll take care of you. You can sing as much as you want—forever. I promise. You can count on me."

They were married within days. He took her to his small bachelor house and made her his wife, and she told her father she was living with Garver now, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Garver delighted in having someone so young and beautiful as his wife, and Marie sang on the radio, learning new songs every day. For a time things went well enough, even though Marie's father would speak to neither his daughter nor his friend. He frequented the bar where he and Garver used to meet with friends and told them his troubles. "I thought he was my best friend," he'd say, "but now he does this. He's old enough to be her father." And then he'd point to one or the other of them and say, "You have a daughter Marie's age, don't you?"

And they'd all look into their drinks and mutter about Garver and his young, beautiful wife they listened to on the radio every single night, wishing they were Garver. Soon none of them would have anything to do with him because of the awful thing he'd done.

The wild bird sings sweetest, they'd say when Marie's father wasn't around. Though second best is an old rickety cage, the door hanging by one hinge, right next to a wide open window, a vast moonlit night to fill with song.

No. Garver didn't have any friends anymore. He began to wonder what he did have.

Garver took Marie aside one day as she was about to sing on the radio. She was always, it seemed, about to sing on the radio. Tonight it was with a piano player. The station manager wanted to try different things besides just the banjo band all the time. That was fine with Garver. He was beginning to wish he'd never had the silly idea in the first place. "I want to move to another town," he told her. "Somewhere nobody knows us. I'm tired of people looking at us, talking about us behind our backs." He wanted to say he was tired of how all the moonstruck men in the town looked at her, but he didn't. She knew that already.

"Don't let it bother you," she said. "I don't even notice it. Besides, I have my job here singing on the radio." She had her eyes on the radio technician who would cue her when she was on the air.

She's scarcely listening to me, Garver thought. All she cares about is singing on the radio. Things have gotten completely out of hand. Maybe her father was right. Maybe I never should've let her sing. "We're moving to another town, and that's that," he said. "There's more important things than singing on the radio. You're my wife now. You have responsibilities. After this song, that's it."

That night Marie lay awake in their bed as Garver slept beside her. She rose from the bed and fumbled around in the dark until she found the banjo her father had hung around her neck, the banjo that had started all this hope and heartache. It was a warm summer night. Everything was wet from a light shower, and the moon was bright. Marie stood barefoot in the middle of the road dressed only in her cotton gown. She held the banjo in her hands, her fingers wrapped around its neck, the phony hummingbirds glittering in the moonlight. She drew the banjo back like an axe, intending to smash it on the pavement, when the hummingbirds flew into the air and made a sound like plucked strings, but with a shape like a voice, and the voice was saying, "Stop! We'll help you sing. We *want* you to sing. We're birds, but we can't sing—not without you. Imagine what that's like for us after all these years of hanging silently on your father's wall. You can't let Garver stop you. We'll teach you a song to change his mind. Please! You can count on us!"

It seemed to Marie, she'd heard that before. They were mother-of-pearl hummingbirds—not an actual species, of this Marie was quite certain—and they were talking to her, or what was equally chilling, she *understood* them to be talking to her, when in fact they probably didn't even exist. She squinted at the fretboard in the moonlight. No hummingbirds.

They continued to flutter in front of her face.

This could only mean one thing. "I'm crazy," she said. It was a relief, in a way, to get that settled. Her father often told her she was crazy, stupid as well, though she knew that wasn't true (though crazy could make a person seem stupid, she supposed). He called her worse things, and she wasn't any of those either.

The furious beating of the hummingbirds' wings sounded like a ringing in her ears. They hovered before her, awaiting her reply and her mercy. She released the banjo's neck from her death grip, held it out as a perch, and the hummingbirds returned to their usual places.

"How can a song change Garver's mind?" she asked them.

"It's enchanted," they replied.

"Of course. Teach me, then."

So Marie sat in the moonlight in her white cotton gown in the middle of the rain-slick road, and the hummingbirds taught her a song she'd heard somewhere before but had never sung. Garver favored light, romantic fare for the band, and certainly not gospel songs about death and the afterlife, entirely too doctrinal for the airwaves. The song was the bluegrass standard "I'll Fly Away."

In the morning, acting on the advice of the hummingbirds, she went into their bedroom as Garver was just waking up and performed the song for him, accompanying herself on the banjo, which now seemed to play itself, though Marie knew it to be the hummingbirds playing so skillfully, while she merely went through the motions. Garver had frowned on her accompanying herself when she sang. It was common, he said. Country. Now she played with a facility he could only dream of, and her voice was not only every bit as beautiful as it had always been, but haunting as well, as she sang the excruciating song with the nasal twang of pain and enchantment the hummingbirds had taught her.

To his horror she looked him in the eye and sang, *"Like a bird from these prison walls I'll fly! I'll fly away!"* and he knew himself to be a prison, and her, a defiant captive. By the time she sang *"no more cold iron shackles on my feet, I'll fly away!"* he was writhing on the bed in agony, pleading with her to stop, but she mercilessly sang all the way to the end, to the last repetition of the relentless refrain: *"I'll fly away, oh glory! I'll fly away, when I die, Hallelujah, by and by. I'll fly away!"*

There was no more talk of moving away. Garver's days and nights were haunted by images of Marie flying away, free of the earth, free as a bird, free of him, and he had only himself to blame, for she'd placed her trust in him, and he'd betrayed her.

She planted trumpet vines all around their house, moved into her own room, and sang every night on the radio, accompanying herself on the banjo. The other members of Garver's Banjo Band quietly abandoned their musical careers and silently applauded Marie's victory.

Marie's father, however, was more upset than ever. Not only was his daughter singing on the radio, but now she sang hillbilly music, Negro music, songs with strange rhythms in dark minor keys, in French and Spanish and languages he'd never heard before, no telling what she might be saying, hollering, and yodeling, to further embarrass her husband. "Poor Garver," he said to his friends.

Poor Garver, his friends agreed, for they knew he had once possessed Marie's love but had lost it forever, and what could be more wretched than that? How could he have told her not to sing? Might as well tell the sun not to shine. And if she chose to sing in strange tongues, perhaps, each one dreamed, she might—it was possible—be singing to him. The wild bird sings sweetest, but the crazy bird sings most passionately—with reckless abandon.

They talked with Marie's father late at night, for they only came into the bar after Marie was finished singing on the radio. They stayed for a drink or two, a verse and refrain from her father's ceaseless lament, and when they'd go, he'd still be there, turning things over in his mind, his huge hands grappling with each other on the scarred wet table top like two perfectly matched thugs fighting in an alley.

And then one night in the wee hours of the morning, Marie's father diverted from his usual route home, taking the lonely road that ran out by Garver's place, and there in the moonlight he saw Marie conversing with the hummingbirds from the banjo he'd given her what seemed ages ago.

He wasn't surprised. Marie's mother, his ungrateful wife, had placed a curse upon it, she claimed, that unless Marie played it she would never play another instrument and would mock him all her days. She carefully inlaid the hummingbirds herself. She was a true artist. That's why he married her. Her inlay greatly enhanced the value of even a mediocre instrument, and this was as fine a banjo as money could buy.

Now he hid in the bushes, cursing silently to himself, as the hummingbirds taught Marie another evil song to sing that night on the radio. He waited until Marie had gone inside, turned out the light and must surely be asleep, then stole into her room and took the banjo out into the night. He drew it back like an axe and smashed it against the pavement, over and over, until the banjo felt light and insubstantial in his hands. Then he tossed the shattered pieces into a ditch and went home to sleep.

Early next morning, Marie woke to the sound of mother-of-pearl hummingbirds beating their wings furiously against her window. They made a staccato noise like a sleet storm, but it was late summer. She threw open the window, and in they flew, lighting upon her vanity. They looked fine on the dark cherry surface. Marie remembered the wood dusted with her mother's powder like a new-fallen pink snow, as Marie watched her make herself beautiful. Marie looked into the glass, and there was her mother's face. "This time he's gone too far," her mother said.

"I thought you were dead," Marie said.

"No. I flew away. You must also."

"But I can't. I have my job singing on the radio."

"There are other radio stations. Networks. Record companies."

"But they don't know me."

"All they have to do is hear you sing."

"How will they ever hear me now?"

"Jimmy's recorded every one of your performances," her mother said. "Jimmy's in love with you."

Jimmy was the technician at the radio station. Whenever she looked at him his eyes were full of stars. "He is not." Well, maybe he was.

Her mother laughed. "Ask him for help. Ask him to play his recordings for other stations. He loves you so much, I bet he'd drive all the way to Chicago if you asked him to."

"Does he have a car?"

"If he doesn't, I bet he loves you so much he'll steal one."

Marie looked behind her mother into the shadows at her back that filled the corner of the room where the morning sun had yet to shine, and she thought she saw a young man who looked a lot like Jimmy, and maybe he did look like a man in love. And behind him were dozens more.

As it turned out, Jimmy didn't steal a car; he begged and borrowed his father's, lying about why he suddenly needed to drive to Chicago with a stack of records. His father was one of the men who talked to Marie's father down at the bar where the big man had suddenly turned jovial, while his audience had grown glum, ever since Marie's singing on the radio had been replaced by recordings of her old performances. They knew these songs would soon run out, so that each time they listened, it was like listening to her die a slow death, and with her, all their dreams.

Marie wasn't about to die. Her mother and the hummingbirds had certainly been right about Jimmy, who claimed to have loved her even before he heard her sing, a claim she didn't quite believe, but it was sweet of him to say so nonetheless. His love bore fruit, and soon he'd secured her a job singing on a network. "Coast-to-coast," he said.

"Coast-to-coast," she said reverently, for she could scarcely imagine such a thing. Marie had never seen a coast, an ocean, a beach, a wave, a boat bigger than a rowboat before, but soon she found herself crossing the ocean in a great liner where she sang every night, playing on a new banjo finer than anything that ever hung on the wall in her father's shop, but like the old one, graced with mother-of-pearl hummingbirds. Every officer proposed—and too many gentlemen passengers to count—but she demurred, claiming she was married, which, in name only, was still true. Her mother urged her to accept the captain's suit anyway, but he reminded her too much of her father, though the captain was a short man with delicate hands. She saw a certain something when he stood in the spotlight and toasted her at his table that told her, for reasons utterly mysterious to Marie, that should she marry him, he wouldn't long allow her to sing.

Unknown to Marie, her father had followed her, laboring in the engine room below. He'd realized his mistake in destroying the banjo but not the hummingbirds, and he waited for his chance to rectify his mistake, following her from city to city as she toured Europe, but she was always surrounded by a crush of admirers and stayed in hotels that protected her privacy.

He soon found himself in Paris—where she was all the rage, held over indefinitely—and he was unable to speak to a soul. "My daughter," he'd say, "is disgracing me in the eyes of the world!" And perhaps one or two of the Parisians to whom he spoke merely feigned ignorance of English to avoid what promised to be a tedious theme, but they let him buy them drinks anyway. He'd made good money on the ocean liner, and he had nothing to spend it on but bars and cheap hotels.

And women.

Marie's father had never been to a city like Paris before. Parisians might say that's because there is no other city like Paris, which is certainly true—but Marie's father had never even been to Kansas City. Somehow, it seemed, he had less trouble finding women who spoke English than men—beautiful women who listened sympathetically to his tale of woe, all about his ungrateful singing daughter, or was it his wife? No matter. It blurred in the telling, everything did, and then all the money was gone, and so were the women.

He woke up one morning to find that Marie had left Paris for New York—for her triumphant return to America. He was desperate to follow her, but he detested the idea of working in the bowels of another ship. He wanted to cross the ocean standing on deck like everyone else who thought they were better than him, like the dandies Marie sang to in the fancy saloons they had on those ships. He needed a ticket. Marie would be there waiting for him in New York City, taking her bows, sucking down all that adoration like nectar from a flower.

He took a job demolishing a block of fire-damaged buildings because the pay was good. When the bosses saw his size and what he could do to a wall with a big hammer, they didn't care whether he could speak the French he steadfastly refused to learn as if avoiding contagion. The bosses pointed at things, and he knocked them down or ripped them out of the wall or crushed them into powder.

It was dangerous work. The structural timbers of the buildings were weakened from the fire, and there was always the chance, working on the upper floors, that it all might give way, and the workers and their hammers and their rubble would find themselves in the basement, dead. That's why all the workers were men who wouldn't be missed. There were stories of men like them left for dead beneath other buildings—haunting the rich new tenants—but Marie's father understood none of these stories passing between his fellow workers in senseless French, and to escape their constant mutterings, he worked in the uppermost floors the others avoided, alone.

One day at sunset he stepped into the upper room of a badly sagging structure to find the roof was gone and birds had nested on the mantelpiece. They'd flown away at his entrance but left three eggs no bigger than the battered nail on his little finger in a nest of fine metal he recognized at once as strings from a guitar or a banjo, coiled into a little basket, rusted to the color of dried blood.

It was the mantelpiece he was supposed to salvage, ornately carved vines covered its marble columns. The mirror above was badly damaged from its exposure to the wind and the rain. He looked in the glass, and his reflection was

cracked and flecked into a thousand pieces. Etched vines trailed around the edge of the mirror with big, drooping blossoms. He picked up the birds' nest between thumb and forefinger, and the eggs cracked open. The hummingbirds flew to the glass, hovered about the blossoms, turning them a fiery red. The hummingbirds were dark green with crimson throats.

His wife's face looked out of the glass. "Why don't you leave her alone?" she asked. "It wouldn't hurt you to be nice."

It wouldn't hurt you to be nice. That's what she always said. But it did. It hurt to be nice, to feel. It made him feel insignificant. Like music, when it took over the air like a magic spell, when it came spewing forth from flesh and blood, from who knows where, twisting his heart and laughing. It was awful to be nice.

He swung the big hammer into the mirror, using both big hands, putting his whole body into it, showering himself first with glass, then with bricks, as his blow toppled the weak chimney towering over his head, and the weight of the bricks broke through the floor, and each succeeding floor, until he lay in the basement under a heap of rubble, left for dead.

It took most of the night to dig himself out. He washed his wounds in the river and broke into a clothing store and took the biggest suit he could find. The arms and legs were too short, but it would do. He stole a car and drove to the coast, hung around the ticket office until an American showed up. He followed the man and then beat him to death for his ticket to New York. He took the man's identification and dumped him in the harbor. Herbert Macready was his name. His berth was in steerage, and when his overly inquisitive neighbors asked, he said he went by Mac, had no family, never married, never considered it. He kept to himself, though he was occasionally seen on deck in the middle of the night.

When the police finally came around to ask about the man who had called himself Herbert Macready, all anyone could remember was that he was a big man with unusually large hands and ugly scars all over his head—"like somebody dumped a ton of bricks on his head," as the steward put it. "He kept a handkerchief over the mirror. You could see why."

By the time police looked for him in New York City, where he had lived for a time as Mac Macready, he had moved on, and the trail went cold.

Marie missed singing alone—completely alone—singing to the people in the shadows who stood on the edge of things, not completely real until the finest notes of the song, like herself. They needed her, and what she gave was always enough, a gift for both. Now when she sang, she sang to everyone, to no one, to every shadowless corner of the world—a Star. And it was never, ever enough.

She still held her rendezvous with the hummingbirds every night beneath the stars—or the wind and the rain if necessary—and she knew she was nothing like the stars—distant, silent fires. She was more like the wind, a tireless north wind. Singing with the hummingbirds was not singing alone either, but singing with her madness. She couldn't complain. Her madness had saved her from silence.

The starlight glittered from the hummingbirds' wings. "You're not listening," they scolded her. They were trying to teach her a song they'd heard on the streets of Paris outside a bordello where her father had been forbidden to ever return. When the women learned he was dead, crushed under a heap of rubble, they burst into this song.

At least that's the story the hummingbirds told. Sometimes Marie wished they wouldn't tell her so much about the songs they gathered for her, their enchantments and curses still clinging to them, though she knew that's where their beauty came from, why they sought her voice to sing them.

They were on the balcony of her place high in the Rockies. Snow had fallen, and now it was crisp and clear, and starlight glittered from everything. Marie had places in many places—New York, San Francisco, Miami Beach. All of them, like this one, had a fence somewhere at the edge of the property, men and dogs who patrolled it to protect her privacy. She had found that this was necessary. Privacy, however, was not the same thing as being alone. This was her newest place. A mountain retreat, the famous architect called it. She imagined advancing armies, coming up the valley, her in steady retreat.

"I miss singing alone," she told the hummingbirds.

"What are you talking about? We're completely alone here. Surely you're not worried about the guards."

Marie suspected the hummingbirds were only pretending not to understand. "Not the guards. If *we* are alone, that's not really alone, is it?"

There was a moment when all you could hear was the silence of the mountains, the stillness of the winds, the distance of the stars. The hummingbirds flew into the air with a clatter. "Fine," they said. "We'll leave you alone, if that's what you want."

"It is," Marie said, and the hummingbirds flew away, or seemed to, for they lit upon the snow-covered railing where they were all but invisible. Marie, who had her eyes on the distant stars, hadn't noticed.

Alone, she thought. I don't want to waste a moment. And she began to sing. Hesitantly, at first. There was no orchestra, no ushers, no crew, no mike, no broadcasting tower; only the snowy pines and icy cliffs. Some of the dogs were barking in the distance, as if in response, and she smiled and opened up her lovely voice and let it ring out, singing the songs she used to sing in the empty music store into the sublime mountain landscape like the face of God and felt, not like the queen of the world, but like its beating heart.

And there they were, the people in the shadows. She'd missed them. Terribly. She could only realize how much seeing them now, listening. There was someone standing under the eaves with an aching heart. She held out her hand to him and sang the finest note of the song, and he stepped from the shadows, hat in hand. He was a middling size fellow

in a rumpled suit, maybe too big for him, or maybe sagging from wear. His scuffed leather shoes were half-buried in snow, but he didn't seem to mind. He shyly took her hand as the echoes of her song faded away. "Thank you," he said. "That was the prettiest song I ever heard. I can't tell you how much it meant to me."

The door to the balcony flew open with a loud crash, all the glass shattered. It hung by one hinge. A huge man stepped through the doorway, his face so scarred even his daughter wouldn't have recognized him if it hadn't been for the enormous hands he held out in front of him, dripping blood on the snow. "Where are they?" he demanded in a rumbling voice he hadn't used in weeks. "Where are the little demons?"

She knew who he meant. "They've flown away," she said.

"I don't believe you."

"See for yourself."

But he didn't have to. The man who'd vanished back into the shadows the instant Marie's father burst through the door, stepped out again and pointed at the railing, at the snow where the hummingbirds were all but invisible in the glittering whiteness. Then there were others—some kid sitting on a snowy bough, an old woman in an icy shawl, a salesman from Kansas City with a sample case of reeds and mouthpieces, strings and picks, a plain girl who sang in the dark to people she knew, but didn't know, and changed them—all pointing where the hummingbirds were hidden in plain sight.

Once they were pointed out to him, he saw them immediately, could see nothing else. He knew them well. They'd haunted his dreams and poisoned his thoughts, and he knew they were quick and elusive, so there was no hesitating: He dove through the air and seized them in his great hands and crushed them to death, relishing his victory.

He fell over a thousand feet before hitting rock.

At the autopsy, his hands were still clenched together and had to be pried apart with a large crowbar. Inside them were found crushed wood, pulverized mother-of-pearl and other shells, and traces of an adhesive of the sort used for inlays on musical instruments.

Marie explained to a curious investigating officer that there had been an inlay on the railing—hummingbirds and flowers—and that her father was completely mad, never quite right ever since a horrible accident in Paris she'd only just been made aware of. The builder of the house insisted there was no such inlay, that it would never stand up to the elements, but the investigating officer, who was half in love with Marie himself, found the matter not worth pursuing, especially since several guests of the famous singer, a rather seedy lot of hangers-on they seemed to him, claimed to have seen the hummingbirds as well.

Marie lived up there for many years. She sold off her other places and rarely performed. Folks claimed to have stood at the south end of the valley when the wind was from the north and heard her singing all times of the day and night, said it changed you to hear it, even a note or two before the wind blew it all away, but folks said a lot of things, and eventually Marie went on to lead quite a different, ordinary life. She spoke little of the old.

But I believe it all to be true. I'm one of those she changed. I never told a story till I heard her sing, and thereafter stories were all I could think about. She was my mother, but I still had to hide and wait until she thought she was alone. She sang, folding laundry on the table above me, and the one song was enough. ❧

Dennis Danvers has published seven novels, including the recently re-released *Wilderness*, *Circuit of Heaven*, *The Watch*, and *The Bright Spot* (under the pseudonym Robert Sydney). Recent short fiction includes stories in *Richmond Noir* and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. He is at work on *Wings*, a novel about angels. He teaches science fiction and fantasy at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. His website is http://www.dennisdanvers.com.

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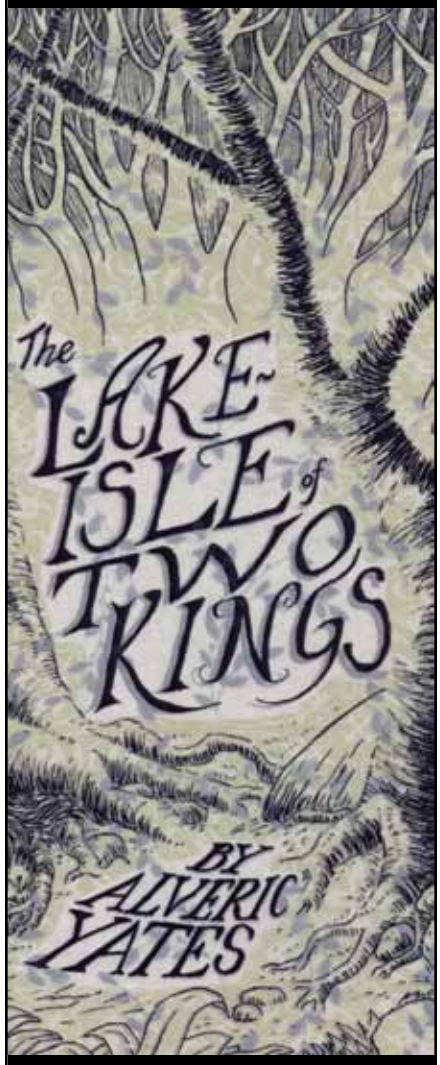

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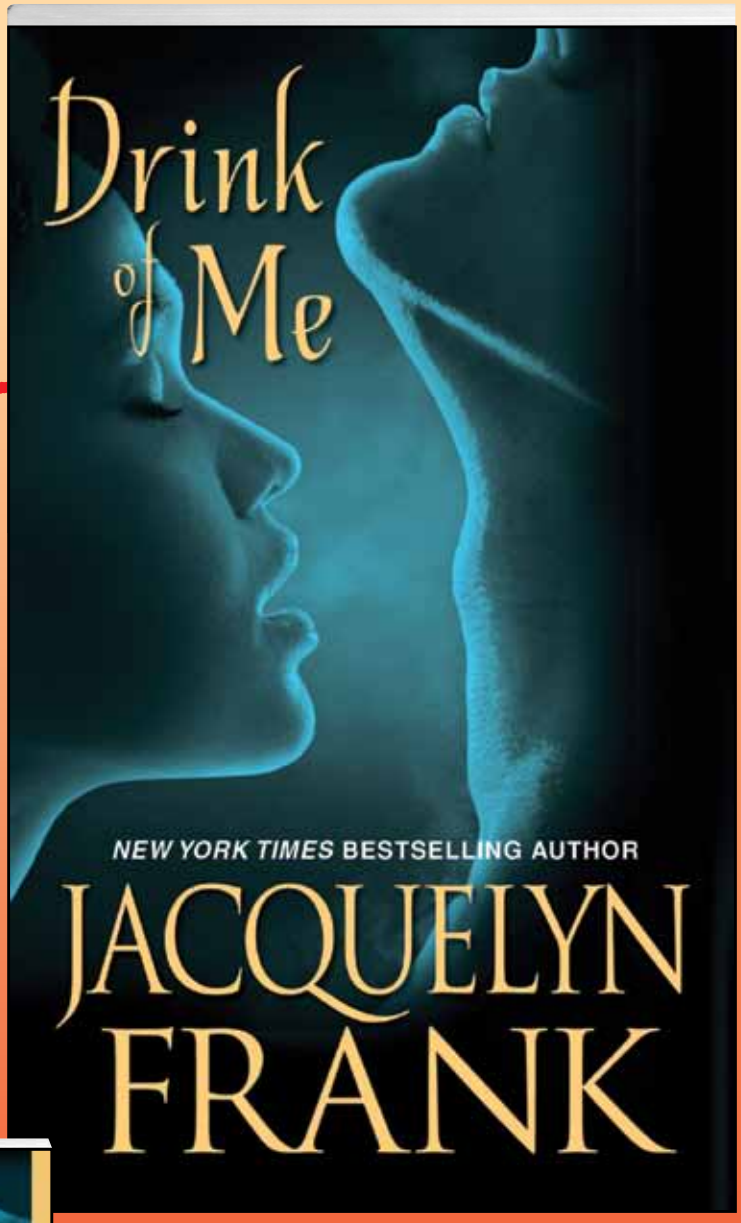

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If all your plans go wrong, that's a bad thing. But what if it's a bad plan to begin with?

Illustration by Kristina Carroll

The mule nipped at Marjan's hand as she burdened it with her packs. She pushed its nose away, careful not to hurt it. She needed the mule to be well. Her life—and her unborn child's—depended on it.

She led the mule outside the stable and carefully latched the door behind them. She didn't want the other animals to suffer from the cold. Bad enough she was stealing the mule. She didn't want Iresna and Gavek to lose anything else.

She mounted and kicked the lazy mule into motion. Its hooves crunched slowly across the snow, step after step, into the endless night. Marjan could have walked faster, but didn't have enough endurance for the long descent through the icy mountains.

Her whole body felt tight and tense. Her belly cramped. *Relax,* she told herself. She couldn't allow herself to start the ride so weak and weary.

She stared into the dark, wishing for a thicker moon to strengthen the light. Dense clouds obscured the needle-pricks of the stars. The air smelled crisp and vacant. New, wet flakes tumbled across Marjan's cheeks, and she realized it was snowing. She pulled her hands into the sleeves of the too-large furs she'd also stolen from Iresna's chests.

The snow came faster and harder, whipping little pains of ice. Wind hissed and howled. This wasn't just winter's cold, she realized with increasing dread. It was a storm, a powerful one.

Her stomach cramped with fear. She twisted to look behind, but she couldn't tell how far they'd come through the cold and the dark. She thought about turning back to the stables and sheltering there, but she couldn't. Gavek and Iresna would find her. They'd want to know why she'd fled. Afterward, they'd watch her. She'd never find another occasion to slip away—not before the baby was born.

Her stomach cramped again. Cold and fear and pain—she moaned. The sound came back to her on the driving wind. As she heard it, she realized that just as this wind was not an ordinary winter wind, her pain was not an ordinary winter pain.

She cursed. It was too early.

The mule plodded onward, step after heavy step. Marjan trembled against its neck, terrified of the next contraction. What would she do? She was alone. There was no help for her. Ever since her mother abandoned her as an infant, leaving her with a stranger, her life had always been like this—one moment of desperate isolation after another, with no one familiar to turn to. The Mark burned on Marjan's hip like the brand it was, the only spot of heat in the cold.

Marked on the arm, a witch can cast harm.
Marked on the face, she's a healing embrace.
Marked on the heart, and love is her art.
Marked on the thigh, and let out a sigh—
She may do it all, but it all goes awry.

The old rhyme was all Marjan had been able to think of the day before as she went with her brother-in-law, Gavek, and her mother-in-law, Iresna, to the mortuary hut and consigned her husband's body to its eternal rest.

Vatska had died while working with Gavek to fix the roof. Marjan watched them out the window as they labored, two big men with thick beards and thick arms. She felt grateful for them both, but particularly for her enormous, gentle Vatska. She'd just turned back inside when a rope broke from the pulley and Vatska fell. The ice cracked. Vatska's spine snapped. He lingered, unconscious, for nearly a day before his breath stopped.

If it had been warmer, if the ice had broken, neighbors and relatives would have come to help. But the snows had fallen early, and seemed determined to remain until the last possible day of winter, and so the three of them labored alone.

Gavek stood atop the ladder that led into the mortuary hut. He levered Vatska's body while Marjan and her dour mother-in-law steadied the corpse.

"Careful, girl," Iresna scolded. "Don't drop my Vatska."

Iresna had never liked Marjan. Since the moment she came into the house, Iresna had nothing to say to her but criticisms and stinging retorts. No matter how hard Marjan worked, Iresna resented her. She didn't know why she'd expected Iresna to put aside her anger today, just because they were mourning Vatska.

Marjan's eyes stung with her own grief. She would not let the old woman goad her into further tears.

"He won't fall, Mama," said the good-natured Gavek. "Besides, he's with the Solitary God now."

They laid Vatska's body in the stilted hut, safely beside his father's. They trudged back to the house in silence. Even the extra warmth of late pregnancy couldn't protect Marjan from the knife-sharp wind and her own loneliness. She pressed her hand against the concealed Mark on her hip that would mean death for herself and her child as soon as Gavek or Iresna discovered it.

She may do it all, but it all goes awry.

Marjan had been living with Gavek, Iresna, and Vatska for five years, ever since Vatska found her working as a maid in an inn on the southern trade route where winter was not quite so bitter. He'd courted her over the course of his annual stays, buying gifts and sitting late after the other customers so he could chat with Marjan alone. He told her that he headed a small family estate in the mountains where he lived with his unmarried brother and aging mother. It was a hard life, he said, but there was food enough and more, and he would like a wife.

Marjan was not a fool. As a Marked woman, she knew that she was lucky to be alive in times when the priests of the Solitary God killed any witches they found. She did not plan to make her mother's mistake and become pregnant. If she bore a Marked girl, she would be forced to flee with the child until she found someone who cared more for the old ways than they did for their own safety—someone like her own foster mother.

Still, she'd lain with men while working at the inn. She'd always been careful to use the midwife's herbs to keep their

seed from catching. Vatska's offer woke a stirring in her that she'd thought long buried, the yearning for a hearth and family of her own.

"We'll never have children," Marjan told him, leaving him to make his own assumptions.

That was all right, Vatska said. So Marjan packed her meager possessions and followed him into the mountains.

At first when Marjan's flow didn't come, she thought it was simply late. She couldn't be with child. She'd taken the herbs faithfully whether she laid with Vatska or not.

She began feeling sick to her stomach. Her waistband grew tighter. She checked her herbs, and found them safe, dry, and uncompromised by vermin. How could this have happened?

It was deep into autumn when she finally conceded the truth. She could think of nothing else to do except convince her husband that she needed to return to her old village. Once there, she could consult with the midwife. She went to Vatska and pleaded. He frowned; she'd never shown any interest in going back before. Still, he was a good man, and he agreed. Even though it was unseasonably late, they would go next week when he had goods.

But the snows came early that year. They crippled the crops. A girl child went walking the night before a blizzard and was found in the morning, stiff and blue. Vatska promised to take Marjan to the village in springtime. By then it would be too late.

Marjan had no choice but to trust the man she'd married.

There was no privacy in the farm house during winter, not with four people trapped in two rooms, so Marjan asked Vatska to meet her in the stables. He sobered when he saw her sitting on a bale of straw, her face pale and grief-stricken. "What is it?"

"Vatska," she said, steeling her voice against her fear. "I am a Marked woman."

She felt him flinch. She'd never shown herself to him naked except in the dark when shadows concealed her secret. "Show me," he said.

Marjan bowed her head so she wouldn't have to meet his eyes. She lifted her skirts. The red and black swirl on her hip wasn't like the ordinary blotches that sometimes marred other children's skin. The colors whirled around each other, vivid and entrancing. In the presence of her own mother or daughter, the Mark would glow—in the days before there were kings in Dellosert, people had seen that glow and known they beheld a woman of power. Now the glow attracted priests' blades.

Sometimes Marjan wondered what it would have been like to live before the Solitary God, when Marked pairs of mothers and daughters sat on three-legged stools in temple rooms, aiding supplicants. Now, only a few Marked women survived, scattered and separated from their kin. Isolated, they posed no threat to the Solitary God's power—even Marked women could only perform witchcraft when they were united with mothers or daughters of their blood. When their Marks began to glow with power, the Solitary God's defenders sought them without pity.

Marjan felt Vatska's fingers, warm and probing. It was strange to be touched there. Strange to be seen.

She wondered for a moment that she wasn't more fearful. He could slay her now. He might.

His voice was gentle. "Hush, Marjanka. Perhaps it will be a boy."

Perhaps—but if she was going to bear a boy, why would her Mark have begun to glow like warming embers? She tried to tell him. He stilled her lips with his finger.

"We'll find a way," he said, bringing her close into the comfort of his arms. She savored the smell of his skin, fish and smoke and the dusky scent underneath that was nothing else but Vatska.

Now he was gone. Marjan and her daughter were at the mercy of her stern, critical mother-in-law, who prayed to the Solitary God every sunrise and sunset.

Iresna would have killed her if she hadn't fled. Now the ice would kill her anyway.

She may do it all, but it all goes awry.

The snow fell so heavily that it blanketed Marjan and the mule as they rode. The donkey couldn't progress against the driving winds. The air had the smell of a worsening storm, an emptiness that filled Marjan's mouth and nostrils.

Marjan halted the mule and hunkered beside it, trying to share enough warmth that they could survive until morning. She dug at the snow to make an impromptu shelter. Another contraction hit. She nearly cried out, but muffled the noise with her mittened hand, afraid she'd spook the animal and make things worse for them both.

"Marjan!" A man's baritone echoed across the snow, tumbled by the wind. "Marjan! Wait!"

Marjan scrambled to look out. The lantern-lit figures of Gavek and Iresna trudged through the snow. She felt a moment of hope at the prospect of rescue—but she couldn't let them take her back.

"Go back!" she shouted.

"Stupid girl!" Iresna shouted back. "You married my Vatska for this? To steal from us and run?"

"You don't understand!"

"What would you have me do? Leave you to freeze with our mule?"

"Vatska's dead! We don't owe each other anything! Turn back!"

Gavek swung his lantern toward her. "At least come off the river!"

Marjan looked about, startled. Surely, if the slight glow in the east was sunrise, this couldn't be the river. She should have crossed long before.

"Stay off the ice, Mama," came Gavek's voice. "It's too close to spring."

Iresna trudged stolidly onward. She raised her arm into the gloomy dawn, mittened hand pointing at Marjan. "You, who married my Vatska. Get back on the mule and lead us home or we'll all die here. Do you want to be my death as

well as your child's? This storm hasn't even started! Stupid, stupid girl."

"I won't go home with you! You never wanted me in your house!"

Wind gusted, spattering ice onto Marjan and the mule. Another cramp gripped Marjan's stomach.

"No!" she said to herself. "Not now!"

"What?" asked Iresna.

"Nothing! Go home—" The peak of Marjan's contraction twisted away her words.

"Your baby's coming? Here? Now?" Iresna shook her head. "I hope you're happy. Now we'll all die."

She moved quickly across the snow to Marjan's side. Marjan tried to fight her off, but Iresna was not tired from long, futile hours of riding.

"Hold still, girl," said Iresna. "We'll argue later."

Marjan laid back, in too much pain for further struggle. Iresna rooted through the mule's packs, pulling out furs and blankets to drape around them. Gavek, uneasily watching his footing, came across the ice to help. They constructed something like a small, cramped tent over them, the close air smelling of hot oil and mule flesh.

"Close your eyes, Gavekska. These are women's secrets," said Iresna. She felt underneath Marjan's skirts. "Ah, it won't be long. Not the next moment, but not long. I don't suppose you can walk."

Pain blossomed on Marjan's hip. Her Mark burned ever hotter, glowing like a candle flame through her clothes. She moaned.

His back to the women, Gavek peered out into the storm. "It's getting worse."

"Yes, yes," said Iresna irritably. "And it will get worse than this, too. We won't get home before the baby comes."

Iresna made a cushion of blankets beneath Marjan's hips. Marjan tried to pull away, to keep the woman's eyes off her Mark. "Stop," she said. "Sit with Gavek. I'll do this alone."

Iresna ignored her. "My son comes home with a woman he's found at a village inn. A woman with no family, no money. Not a widow with children, to show she'd give me healthy grandbabies, but an old maid. I think to myself, what does my son want with such a woman? What does such a woman want with my son?"

She pulled Marjan's skirts up to her knees and set the lantern closer. Marjan recoiled from the light.

"And the herbs," Iresna continued. "Seasons go by with no children. I know what to think. But." She settled on her haunches. "The seasons go by, and this woman takes care of my son. I am still suspicious, oh yes. But she cooks and sews and pulls weeds in the garden, and she never complains."

Marjan's voice strained. "I never meant this to happen. Iresna—"

"I'm not such an old fool," said Iresna. "Am I, Gavekska?"

"That depends," said Gavek, "on whether we all die in this storm."

Iresna went on, "You would have done better to refuse when Vatska offered to marry you. Even with herbs, this

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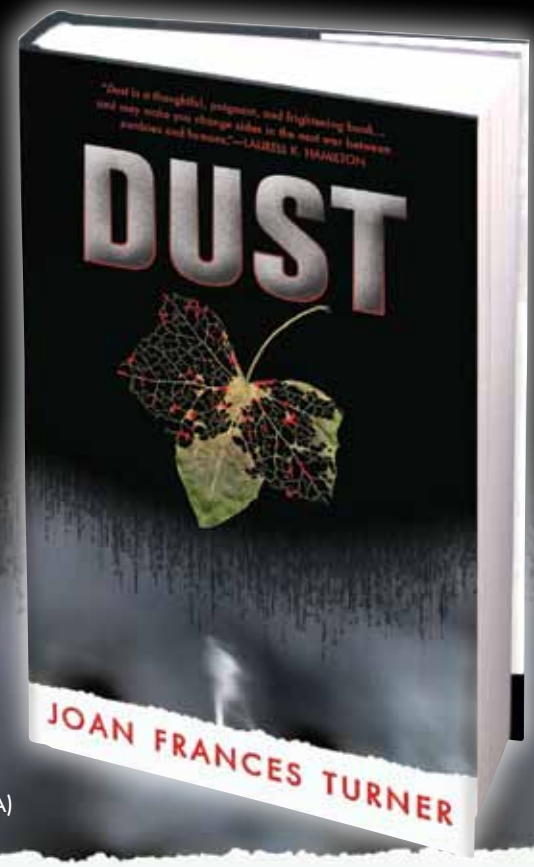

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can happen. But then my Vatska would have been unhappy. And how can I blame you for loving him?"

"Iresna!" Marjan said, urgently. "Please, you and Gavek have to go. Don't ask me to explain. It's better you don't know."

"Marjan," said Iresna, "how could I not know?"

The older woman's eyes flickered down to the spot of brightness at Marjan's hip. It was glowing brighter than the lantern now, bathing Marjan in scarlet light.

Marjan could hide no longer. Iresna would call the priests, and they would die, both of them, before the baby even began to live. She began to cry.

"Hush," said Iresna. "This isn't important just now."

Before Marjan could protest, the pain and helplessness became overwhelming. She could hardly speak or even think. Redness, tightening, the reek of blood and exertion—and suddenly, though it seemed impossible, the baby was pushed from her and into Iresna's outstretched hands.

A wail. The baby was alive. She saw it in Iresna's arms, its Mark glowing brightly, calling to her like a beacon.

Iresna's hand cupped the baby's neck. One flick of her wrist—Marjan shivered from the cold and the fear and wondered if she would ever be warm again.

Iresna held up the child so Marjan could see her. Born prematurely, the girl was small for a newborn, with wrinkled red skin and a shock of black hair like Vatska's that nearly covered her eyes. *"Marked on the heart, and love is her art,"* said Iresna, examining the girl's glowing chest.

"Please," Marjan begged. "I'll do anything. You can't kill her."

"You think I would do that? Kill my own grandchild?"

It was so cold. Marjan could scarcely feel her lips. "You—you always call on the Solitary God."

Iresna wrapped the crying child in her shawl. "When you meet a dangerous thing, you keep your eye on it. You don't do anything threatening. You make sure to keep it calm."

Gavek had turned back to admire the child. "If it's dangerous, you should try to get away from it."

"There is no getting away from the Solitary God. Not these days," said Iresna bitterly. She shifted to allow Marjan to take the wrapped child. "That should have been a difficult birth, but it went more easily than I thought it would. Nurse your child. It will help you both."

The baby's weight felt good in Marjan's arms. It was a strange sensation, touching someone who shared her blood. The baby quieted, sucked. Marjan flooded with warmth. *Dulchenka,* she thought, staring into the tiny face. *I will name you after sweetness, as my own mother named me after bitterness.*

The wind howled outside, but within their little shelter, it was surprisingly warm. Marjan shifted to rid herself of the heaviest blankets. Iresna looked down at mother and child, an old sadness showing in her expression.

"When I was small, I had a sister," Iresna began. "I never told you this, Gavekska. My sister had the Mark on her cheek. *A mark on her face, she's a healing embrace.* If Father had allowed her to live, perhaps she'd have had a daughter. Maybe my Vatska would still be alive." Iresna's mouth puckered sourly. "They told everyone the baby was born dead. I knew better."

She ran her fingers through the baby's shock of black hair.

"It will be hard for anyone to resist this one," she said. "With such a mark, everyone will love her."

"It won't stop the priests," said Marjan.

"No," said Iresna.

Beneath them, the ice began making sharp, popping sounds. Marjan shifted. The ice around her skirts had begun to melt. "My clothes are soaked…" she said.

Gavek and Iresna looked sharply toward each other.

"I told you we should not be on the river," said Gavek.

Beneath the wind, they heard the sound of breaking ice.

"Leave the blankets and things," said Iresna. "We must run."

"Mama," said Gavek, "the wind is blowing. Our clothes are wet. We won't get ten yards before we freeze."

"We won't freeze," said Iresna. "But we may fall through the ice before we reach shore."

The older woman took Marjan's hands, urgently.

"Listen to me. You put my family at risk by coming to marry my Vatska. You led us all to this river so we may die. But you can save us now, you and my granddaughter. Do you think all births go so easily? At times like this? And how do you think the river is melting during a storm? You were cold, weren't you? You wanted to be warm. Your daughter has already helped you work magic. Now you must tell the ice to stay hard."

"How?" asked Marjan.

"You'd best figure it out, or we'll all die here, and it won't matter whether you escape the Solitary God and his knives."

"But we can't… Dulchenka has love magic."

"What does that matter? You're Marked on your thigh. You may do anything. Stop the storm."

Marjan's heart pounded. How could she work magic like this? Even if this truly wouldn't be her first magic, it would still be her first time commanding it. And the rhyme—women like her cast spells that went wrong. This spell couldn't go awry. They'd die if it did. For once in her life, Marjan had to make things happen as they should.

She cradled Dulchenka to her chest. She had a daughter now. She'd never had that before. Her glance flickered toward Iresna's stern face, and for a moment, she felt as though she were looking at the mother she'd never known.

"Let the ice stay strong," Marjan whispered.

The creaking stopped.

She tried again. "Let there be no wind."

The gusts fell silent.

Iresna pulled down the blankets. All around them was a circle of calm. The storm raged around its edges, sleet driven sideways by the wind.

"Can we move?" asked Gavek.

"We must," said Iresna.

They walked home by lantern-light, in a rosy circle surrounded by storm. Marjan cuddled the baby close, treasuring the moments when Dulchenka woke for a moment to latch on

for a suck or two before sleeping again. She pressed her fingers against the warm glow of her daughter's Marked heart. Of all the loves Dulchenka would inspire in her lifetime, she could never make anyone love her more than her mother already did.

Iresna trudged alongside, a grim set to her jaw. At last, in a voice like creaking ice, she said, "You know you can't stay."

Marjan's world cracked open like the river.

"The priests would discover you," Iresna said. "As long as Dulchenka is still a baby, you could never fight them."

It was true, of course. The stories were full of Marked mothers and their infants and how their nascent magic succumbed to blessed blades.

"I've been thinking about it," said Iresna. "I believe we can risk your staying until the end of winter. The storms will protect you until the pass opens."

"You'll keep Dulchenka?" asked Marjan.

"My grandchild? Oh, yes."

"At least she'll be with family," said Marjan, her throat caught with tears. It was more than she'd had herself.

They went the rest of the way in silence, their footsteps the only noise apart from the howling wind.

Gavek set aside goods and coins for Marjan. She worried about taking things she had no right to, but Gavek assured her it was fair compensation for the work she'd done.

He sat with Marjan and Dulchenka during the late winter evenings while they recovered from the birth. He rocked Dulchenka on his knee as her father never would, and looked with awe at the Marks that blazed like firelight through their clothes.

Iresna stayed away. Gavek said it was because she did not want Marjan to go. She came out at last on the final day of winter and wrapped Marjan in a tight, painful embrace.

"Keep in touch with Gavek through the trade inns," said Iresna.

"I will."

Gently, Iresna took Dulchenka from her mother's arms. "When she's old enough, maybe we can find a way for you to meet."

"Perhaps."

Marjan packed the mule—this time with Iresna and Gavek's blessings—and mounted him for the long ride down the peak. Within a mile, her Mark faded so that it no longer showed through her skirts.

Marjan hadn't told Iresna or Gavek, but she had a plan. She would ride through Dellosert, and beyond if necessary, until her Mark began to glow once more, and then she would finally meet her mother.

She wondered how many people still knew the second verse of the witch's rhyme, the forbidden one her foster mother had whispered when she was small:

One witch alone is tragic.
Two witches fill their days with magic.
Three witches who together dwell
can fold the world inside their spell.

Marjan spoke the words like a charm. They gave her hope as she descended the mountain. ❧

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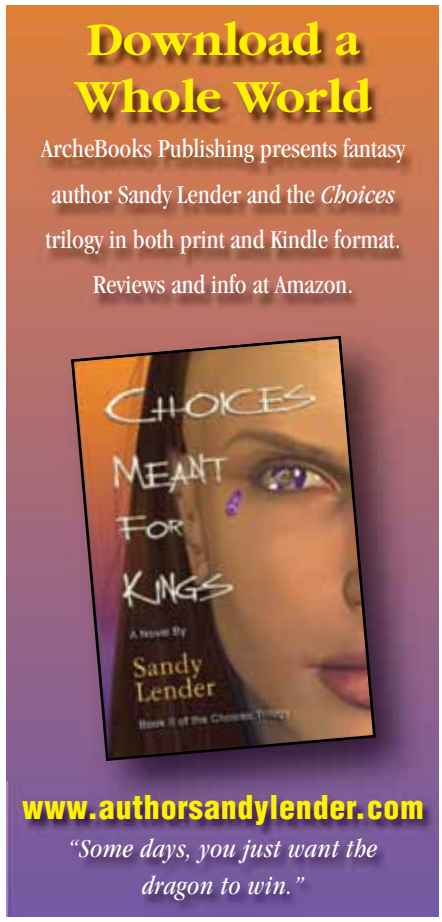
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Illustration by
David Palumbo

Mary was sixteen when she realized that her parents were right. It was a horrible discovery, made all the worse by its timing. Mary was deep into her rebellious phase, and her parents had provided plenty to rebel against. Everything she liked in life, they said was evil, and everything they believed in seemed nonsensical. Gods and demons, Heaven and Hell—it was easy to dismiss the whole package, and Mary was well on her way to doing just that, but if her parents were right about *one* thing, what about the others?

Their insistence that she never allow herself to be photographed had always seemed the most bizarre demand of all, and their reason for it idiotic. She had endured countless taunts from her schoolmates, and deep embarrassment when her parents would wrest cameras away from practical jokers or innocent tourists and smash them on the ground. "Every photograph steals a piece of your soul!" they told her again and again, and their belief was burned so deeply into her psyche that even though she never took it seriously, she never let anyone take her picture, either.

She shivered. She put her own finger on the delete button, but she couldn't bring herself to push it. Part of her soul was already in there. Would she get it back if she deleted it?

Not until Cory, her boyfriend, snapped a shot with his cell phone and held it up for her to see. "I'll delete it," he said quickly, before she could protest, "but just look first. See how beautiful you are."

Even on the phone's tiny screen, she could see that it was a good photo. Her eyes were wide in surprise, and a hint of alarm was just beginning to spread across her face. Her eyebrows were arched, her lips opening to say, "Stop that!" and her face was framed by a cascade of blonde curls caught in mid bounce.

"Wow," she said. "Do I really look like that?"

"Better," he said. "But..." He thumbed the button that would delete it.

"No, wait!" She took the phone from him, held it before her, and stared into her own eyes. In that moment she felt it: a part of her stared back from the image. It was a tiny, insignificant part, but it was definitely real, as real and as much a part of her as the tips of her toes or a strand of her hair.

She shivered. She put her own finger on the delete button, but she couldn't bring herself to push it. Part of her soul was already in there. Would she get it back if she deleted it? More to the point, did she want to? The photo was a work of art. And what good was a soul, anyway? If her parents were right, and apparently they were, then it was a ticket to eternal boredom on one hand or eternal damnation on the other. Her entire life would be a never-ending attempt to preserve it and keep it squeaky clean, all for the chance to kneel at the feet of some cosmic control freak and sing hosannas to His magnificence. Forever. And if she ever messed up...

She handed the phone back to Cory. "Take another," she said.

It took her a year to track down the Devil. He was a busy angel, after all, and she had very few connections with any of his agents. But she followed every lead she could think of, talking with lawyers, volunteering at the Republican Party headquarters, even replying to all of her email spam, and eventually word got around. One night at a college fraternity party that she and her friend Aimee crashed by pretending to be already drunk, a tall, goateed, dark-eyed man that she'd assumed was a grad student followed her out into the back porch when she went out to smoke. She was trying to decide whether to go with a sophisticated put-down or to tell him she was only seventeen when he said, "A soul is a very valuable thing."

She felt a chill run up her spine, and she coughed as if this were her first cigarette. He didn't pat her on the back the way a lecher would; he just waited for her to recover enough to wheeze, "Who are you?"

"I believe you know. I hear you're looking to make a deal."

She realized in that moment that she had never expected to succeed in her search. She waited for her resolve to vanish now that she was face to face with the embodiment of evil, but to her surprise she felt it grow stronger instead. If he was real, then the whole package was real, and she wanted out, bad.

There were a dozen other people in the back yard, most of them smoking, and all of them ignoring the young girl and the grad student on the porch. Still, she kept her voice down when she spoke.

"Fame and fortune and health and happiness," she said, reciting the words she had prepared for this moment. "A long, satisfying life full of genuine accomplishments and full of fun—all as a world-wide celebrity of major movie-star proportions. No tragedies, and no major frustrations. I want to enjoy my life for a full century, minimum, and I want the world to be a better place—better by *my* definition of the word—for my having been here." She was proud of that bit. She'd originally thought she would ask for the world to be a better place after she was gone, but then she realized how that could be interpreted.

So did her visitor. "Well wished," he said. "Except for the fame and fortune part. Are you sure about that? Even if I protect you from stalkers, there will be intrusions on your privacy. Lawsuits. Paparazzi. Those are part of the package."

"I know," Mary said. "I'll deal with them. Because if you're straight with me, they won't present a major frustration, will they?"

He nodded slowly. "You have thought this through. But you ask a great deal. I don't like improving humanity's lot just for one soul."

"That's my price," she replied.

Truth was, she didn't care at all about humanity, but it added plausibility to her request, and hey, she wouldn't mind being a positive force in the world so long as she had a good time along the way. The important bit was the fame and fortune, and not just for fifteen minutes, which was why she had asked for her celebrity to continue for at least a century.

He sighed theatrically, but he snapped his fingers and suddenly held two copies of a contract.

"Sign here, please," he said, pointing to the bottom line.

"Not until I've read it," she said. She hadn't hung out with lawyers for nothing.

"Of course." If he was offended, he didn't show it.

She held the contract out so the porch light illuminated the text—plain Times font on plain white paper—and read it through twice. It was just what she had asked for, and she couldn't see any pitfalls.

"Looks good," she said.

He held out a pen. It wasn't even fancy; just a generic ballpoint.

"Not in blood?" she asked.

He shrugged. "You can if you'd like, but that's not necessary for a binding contract."

So she held the paper down against the porch rail and signed both copies in blue ink. Her signature looked a little wobbly, but she blamed it on the grain of the wood.

He took the pen from her and signed both as well, then gave one copy to her. "I'll see you in eighty-two years, nine months, six days, and three hours," he said.

"Eighty-two?" she said. "We agreed on at least a century."

"Of which you have already lived seventeen years, two months, twenty-four days, and twenty-one hours."

That's not how I meant it, she almost said, but she knew how far that would get her. She had accidentally given him a loophole; of course he would take it. But she had given herself one, too.

"Not all of that time was happy," she replied. "We agreed that I would enjoy my life for a full century, minimum. Unhappy times don't count."

He frowned. He frowned as only someone who tortured souls for a living could frown, but Mary stood her ground. "I'm not enjoying this moment, either," she said.

Did his skin glow with an inner light, the color of a stove burner on high? Had those bumps in his hair been there a moment before? This was clearly a being who didn't like to be thwarted, but he had better get used to it as far as Mary was concerned.

"A hundred years of happiness," she said. "Minimum. I'll take more if you're feeling generous."

He took a deep breath, then slowly the frown bent upward until he was laughing softly. "You may be worth the price," he said. "Very well. I can wait. Enjoy your life, my dear. And I do mean that with the utmost sincerity."

She half expected him to snap his fingers and vanish in a puff of sulfurous fumes, but he just opened the door and went back into the house, leaving her there on the porch with her contract and her cigarette.

That's not how I meant it, she almost said, but she knew how far that would get her. She had accidentally given him a loophole; of course he would take it. But she had given herself one, too.

Which she wasn't old enough to be smoking, it turned out. She was taking the last puff when she heard a commotion inside the house, then the yard exploded with light as a dozen flashlight-wielding cops leaped over the fence from the alley to catch underage drinkers rushing out the back door. Mary was swept along with the tide, and she had the dubious honor of being the first person arrested.

Her father tried to get the mug shots destroyed, but the cops didn't buy his religious exemption story.

"So you've lost a little piece of your soul tonight," he told her on the drive home. "How does it feel?"

"Liberating," Mary replied. It probably wasn't the most prudent thing to say at the moment, but she couldn't resist, even when she realized that her clock was now ticking. It had probably been ticking all night, even in the holding cell while she waited for her father to come get her. It would be ticking when she got home and faced her mother, too. It might tick for a solid month without pause, just for the sheer joy of wrecking so completely the life that her parents had tried to force her into.

But they found a way to derail her new life, too. No religion is so strange that there isn't a school out there somewhere dedicated to indoctrinating still more children into it, and her parents found one that made their house seem like a liberal arts college by comparison. They didn't even give her time to say goodbye to Cory or Aimee; she spent three days grounded while they arranged things, then she was off to boot camp.

Her only consolation in the first few months was the knowledge that she would live to a ripe old age before her contract came due. The school's attempts to harangue her into submission weren't even the worst of it. For the first time in her life she found herself among kids her own age who were just flat out *mean*. And stupid. She would have thought she could outthink a stupid sadist, but it turned out thinking wasn't a survival trait at boarding school. Avoiding rape and mayhem required more primitive methods, like keeping a spoon with a sharpened handle in your sock and buddies at your back.

Without even realizing it as such, she joined the "Mount Covenant Good Girls." There were benefits beyond simple protection: drugs that helped relieve the monotony of religious indoctrination, news from the outside world, and even a glimmer of hope. Most of her homies had plans for when they got out, and although those plans generally started with whacking the parents who had sent them there, they at least represented some belief that this torment would eventually end.

Mary shuddered at the thought of what these screwed-up kids were doing to themselves. Their troubles might diminish for a few years, but even if they could stay out of prison, they were setting themselves up for much, much worse later on. The kind of lives they planned to lead practically guaranteed that. And for what? These guys weren't even selling their souls to the Devil; they were *giving* them away, all for stupid, ephemeral rewards like revenge and more drugs.

That got Mary to thinking, though, about her own future. The Devil was taking his sweet time in granting her wish, but she hadn't given him much to work with. If she wanted fame and fortune, she needed to do something to be famous for, and she didn't want it to be simple notoriety for murdering her parents the moment she got out of boarding school.

When she had made her wish she hadn't really cared what she would be famous for so long as it kept her in the public eye, but the more she thought about what form that public scrutiny should take, the more she realized she wanted the kind of fame rock stars had. They worked for it, but they seemed to genuinely enjoy what they did, and they enjoyed their fame, too. They earned money by the boatload, with the boat thrown in for good measure. And people took pictures of them everywhere they went. It was exactly the kind of life she wanted.

Her instructors credited themselves for her sudden interest in music, and she fed their vanity with every request she made. *Ooh, yes, those hymns we sing before classes are soooo wonderful, I just have to learn how to play them myself. Maybe with your help I could take the Word to more kids my age.* Within a month she had an electric/acoustic Ovation guitar, and the very first song she learned to play on it was "Amazing Grace."

It turned out she had a pretty good set of pipes for a young girl. Smoking had no doubt helped. She wondered if the world had already seen too many pop divas, but she figured one who actually knew how to play her guitar might be rare enough to get some attention. So she set to work learning how to really wail. It wasn't like she had anything better to do.

Music, she learned, even soothed the savage beast. Once she learned how to play, everybody was her friend. She put on concerts for the school, tarting up hymns like "How Great Thou Art," and "When the Saints Go Marching In" until they were just shy of scandalous, and even the most incorrigible gang-bangers had to admire her for pulling one over on the school. Her instructors knew they were being played as well as her guitar, but they also saw that she was making something of herself; the first student in their long experience to do that without a lawsuit directed at the church.

So at last she just waved to everyone and climbed into the limousine that her concert promoter had hired and drove off into a life she had only dreamed was possible.

Eventually word got out. The administration never learned who posted it to "Digg.com," and Mary wasn't about to tell them, but when the story hit the internet there was no holding it back. Within hours, the MP3 of Mary M. DeLain singing "Amazing Grace" had been downloaded a hundred thousand times, and the first of the paparazzi were sneaking into the school disguised as reporters for the local newspaper.

Her parents threw a fit and tried to derail her popularity, but it was like trying to stop the rising sea. The more they tried to deny access to her, the harder the media pried, and the struggle between the wacko religious parents and the celebrity-hungry public only boosted her appeal.

She had three months to go before her eighteenth birthday, and she used that time to her advantage, lining up recording contracts and tour gigs so she could hit the ground running when she became a legal adult. At her parents' insistence the school took away her guitar, but they couldn't stop her from singing, nor could they stop illicit recordings from leaking out over the internet. Pickets sprang up outside the school, chanting and waving signs and drawing even more public scrutiny to the teenage prodigy trapped inside.

Mary's clock was definitely ticking now. She wrote dozens of new songs, practicing the chords on a stick that she had drawn lines on to represent guitar strings. News of that only increased her popularity, as did her insistence that she still loved her parents despite the hardship they were putting her through. She had already sold her soul to the Devil; what harm could there be in telling a lie to boost her appeal?

The entire nation began counting down the days until her birthday, and on the night of October 23, at the stroke of midnight, she strode out of Mount Covenant Boarding School and into a crowd that would have humbled the Beatles. The roar was like a stormy ocean breaking on rocks, and the staccato pulse of camera flashes froze her every movement in stroboscopic frenzy. She had prepared a speech, but she never got the chance to deliver it because the crowd never stopped cheering. So at last she just waved to everyone and climbed into the limousine that her concert promoter had hired and drove off into a life she had only dreamed was possible.

The next few days passed in a whirlwind. She went shopping for a new guitar, gave interviews to more magazines

than she knew existed, shopped for stage clothes, and practiced with the studio musicians who would back her on tour. The paparazzi followed her wherever she went, and she made sure they felt welcome. She posed for them and blew them kisses and even bought them doughnuts and lattés when it looked like they might be getting their fill of photos. They were so shocked by her acceptance of them that they began staying out of her way, treating her more like an expensive model than a hapless celebrity caught in their net.

Her first public performance had been scheduled for the Roseland Theatre, a century-old concert hall that might seat a thousand if they all exhaled, but Mary's promoter quickly arranged to move to the stadium across the river. Mary was so busy being an overnight sensation that she hardly gave it a thought until the day she walked in through the stage entrance for her first rehearsal and stared up at the thousands of empty seats. The empty arena stared back, too large to even return a distinct echo. In three days, every seat would be filled, and every person out there would expect her to live up to all the hype that had brought them here.

"Excuse me," she told her new bandmates, who had followed her onto the stage. "I need to go throw up."

She was still shaking ten minutes later, but she forced herself back onto the stage and picked up her guitar. "Let's start with 'God Damn You to Hell,'" she said, and she raked the strings on the opening G-fifth power chord a couple of times to check her volume. Brian and Crank and Linda banged drums, ran a bass riff, and played a high-fret arpeggio respectively, and with a "One, two, three…" they were off.

Her voice cracked halfway through, but she pressed on to the end, then led them straight into the next song without pause. They ran through her entire repertoire, and by the time they finished she had forgotten the seats, had forgotten the media, had forgotten everything but the music.

The night of the concert she kept herself busy with the minutiae of preparation: dressing, putting on her makeup, doing her hair, until suddenly it was time to go onstage. When she and her bandmates walked out into the lights, the applause was a physical assault that didn't stop until halfway into their first song. She chose "Amazing Grace," of course, and did the last verse *a cappella* just to prove to herself that she could do it.

In later years she often tried to remember that night, but the only part that remained clear was the moment of silence after she sang the last words, the moment of wondering why nobody was applauding, then the thunder of it when they got over their reluctance to ruin that last note and roared their approval.

She often wondered what she could have accomplished on her own, without a contract with the Devil, but it was a theoretical question she would never know the answer to. She had made a deal, which he was paying out beyond her wildest dreams. And her plan to avoid paying him back was working just as she had expected. By the end of her first tour she had been photographed so many times that there couldn't be a shred of soul left for him to collect.

The rest of his deal paid off over time, too. She met Bono at a benefit concert and struck up a friendship, and before she knew it she was flying with him to third-world countries to help organize AIDS and hunger relief programs. The money kept pouring in, more money than she could have spent on herself in a dozen lifetimes, so she poured it right back out to charities and hospitals and libraries all over the world.

The Devil's warning hadn't been hollow: it seemed that she was constantly fighting lawsuits filed by people who wanted a piece of her fortune, or merely the notoriety of suing a celebrity, but she took them in stride, knowing that the time she spent on them didn't count toward her hundred years. The paparazzi gave her trouble from time to time, but she remained on good terms with most of them, enough so that the truly obnoxious ones usually wound up injured by their own kind as a favor to her.

Brian and Crank and Linda stayed on with her throughout the years, and for a while it seemed that her longevity had rubbed off on them as well, but then Brian had a fatal heart attack onstage in Seattle, and a few years later Crank's arthritis got bad enough that he could only play a simple walking bassline, and Linda lost both her hearing and her eyesight to a rare viral infection of the brain.

Mary considered soldiering on alone, or even with a new band, but she was growing tired too. Eighty years in the public eye was plenty. She was no longer paparazzi fodder anyway; they had served one another well, but they had nothing more to offer each other.

So she settled down for a quiet life on Kauai, writing her memoirs and directing the disposition of the last of her estate. As time wore on and she retained her health she became something of a celebrity again, for longevity as much as for her musical and philanthropic accomplishments.

She was out on her front deck, watching the sun set over Niihau, when her century ran out. She had no way of calculating the moment, but she knew in her bones that it was about time, so she wasn't all that surprised when the ground shook like an airplane in turbulence and the sea began to recede. She thought about running for high ground, but she knew how far she would get. Instead, she sat back in her chair and waited for the tsunami.

It was mercifully quick when it struck. The pain and roiling confusion lasted only a moment, then she was past it like a cork out of a bottle and sailing into the light.

How could there be any light? How could there be anything at all? She had been photographed millions of times in her long life; there shouldn't have been any soul left to be drawn anywhere. For the first time since that moment in the empty arena, Mary felt the cold chill of fear wash over her. How had she miscalculated?

She materialized like a *Star Trek* landing party in a sweltering cavern. All around her were naked, sweating people amid stacks of photos, magazines, CDs, DVDs, iPods, musicubes, book readers, and cameras. Heaps of cameras, all

plugged into a blinking bank of computers, on which every screen showed a flickering array of photographs—all of Mary.

She took a step closer to the nearest pile of photos. They were all of her, too. And the magazines were open to articles about her, all illustrated with photos, of course.

She heard footsteps crunching on the gravel behind her, and a voice she hadn't heard in over eighty years said, "Welcome to eternity, Mary."

He looked exactly the same, as if he had come directly here from the frat house. "How did you collect me?" she asked. "My soul was split a million different ways. How did you reassemble it?"

He smiled. "You should have known. If you hadn't been so kind to them, you would have known."

"Known what?"

"That paparazzi are the tools of the Devil. And now, so are you."

He reached for her, but there was a flutter of motion from above and a winged angel swooped in to stand beside him. "Not so fast, Bub," said the angel. "She's ours."

"She is mine, and I have the contract to prove it." The Devil pulled the document that Mary had signed from his breast pocket, but the angel waved him off.

"Doesn't matter. She did more good than harm. The world's a better place for her presence. And she loved her parents. His Omnipotence wants her for His own."

The Devil's eyes turned red and smoke began to rise from his suit jacket, but then he looked over at Mary and suddenly burst out laughing.

"Perfect," he said.

"Perfect?" said the angel.

"I was merely going to torment her for eternity, but she'll be far more use to me tormenting Him." He turned to Mary. "You have such a beautiful voice; it'll be hosannas for you until the last star goes out. Give my regards to the Big Guy."

Mary began to scream. She couldn't stop herself. She screamed as the angel scooped her up and flapped his powerful wings, screamed as he rushed toward the cavern's rocky ceiling, screamed as it opened like a horizontal elevator door, and screamed as they flew through it into a blue sky full of puffy white clouds.

With the last rational part of her mind, she held onto one slim ray of hope: If she kept screaming long enough, maybe they'd kick her out of the choir. ❧

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Believing in Unicorns

by Stephen D. Winick

Of all the creatures of myth and legend, the unicorn is the most beautiful and the most beloved. While the scaly dragon and the cunning sphinx portend danger, the unicorn usually brings good luck. You can read of this noble beast's exploits in ancient travelers' tales, medieval bestiaries, and modern novels, or glimpse its image in monumental friezes, intricately woven tapestries, and even—if you look very closely—in the stars.

The unicorn is usually described as an animal generally like a horse, with some characteristics of a deer or goat, and with a single long horn on its forehead. For centuries, Europeans believed in the unicorn as a real animal that lived in a foreign country. This is not very surprising, for the unicorn is more believable than many real animals. "Compared to him," Odell Shepard (p. 191) opines, "the giraffe is highly improbable, the armadillo and the ant-eater are unbelievable, and the hippopotamus is a nightmare." Still, the unicorn has always had mystical qualities, and gradually these came to dominate unicorn lore. Nowadays, almost everyone agrees that unicorns are magical…even those who still believe in them!

Portrait of Young Woman with Unicorn; oil on canvas applied to wood, by Raphael, c. 1506.

An Indian Ass and a Healing Horn: The Ancient Unicorn

Belief in unicorns began in very ancient times; indeed, tracing it back, scholars find that the trail peters out as writings and artworks themselves become scarce. China and Japan have their own unicorn traditions concerning the ki-lin and kirin, but the first European mention of the unicorn is by Ctesias, a Greek historian of the fifth century, B.C. Ctesias was a physician at the Persian court, and wrote many books, including *Indica*, which describes India. In it, Ctesias describes not only unicorns, but also such marvels as griffins and dog-faced men. Like many travel-writers of his time, Ctesias never visited India; instead, he based his book on the beliefs of Persians, and on accounts from travelers.

Indica survives in fragmentary summaries made by Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople (ca. 810–893 A.D.). In fragment 25, Photius writes:

"In India there are wild asses as large as horses, or even larger. Their body is white, their head dark red, their eyes bluish, and they have a horn in their forehead about a cubit in length. The lower part of the horn, for about two palms distance from the forehead, is quite white, the middle is black, the upper part, which terminates in a point, is a very flaming red. Those who drink out of cups made from it are proof against convulsions, epilepsy, and even poison, provided that before or after having taken it they drink some wine or water or other liquid out of these cups. […] Their huckle-bone is the most beautiful that I have seen, like that of the ox in size and appearance; it is as heavy as lead and of the colour of cinnabar all through. These animals are very strong and swift; neither the horse nor any other animal can overtake them." Ctesias goes on to describe the unicorn's fierceness in battle.

As the first full description of a unicorn, Ctesias's passage is of great importance to unicorn lore. Although the animal's multicolored appearance and jewel-like huckle-bone do not survive to become part of most medieval or modern ideas of the unicorn, many of the other descriptors do: it is like a horse but not quite a horse, has hooves, is a fierce fighter and difficult to hunt, and has a single long horn. Moreover, Ctesias describes in detail the healing properties of the unicorn's horn, especially as an antidote to poison; this is a belief which survived for thousands of years. (The translation of this passage in Shepard [p. 28] states also that the powdered horn is a useful medicine.)

After Ctesias, Classical antiquity did not much love the unicorn, but our one-horned beast peeps around the

edges of history. Aristotle mentions unicorns in passing, stating, "there are some [animals] that have but a single horn; the oryx, for instance, and the so-called Indian ass…. In such animals the horn is set in the centre of the head." The Indian ass is the unicorn described by Ctesias, while the oryx is actually a two-horned antelope… but glimpsed from the side, an oryx can look like it has one horn. Caesar, in book 6 of his account of the Gallic wars, speaks of an ox shaped like a stag. "In the middle of its forehead," he writes, "a single horn grows between its ears, taller and straighter than the animal horns with which we are familiar." This is often taken to be a description of a unicorn, but Caesar goes on to describe finger-like branches on the end of the horn, leading others to interpret it as a reindeer, glimpsed from afar. Aelian, a third-century Roman historian, describes another unicorn, the "cartazon," whose horn is black, and which "has a mane, tawny hair, feet like those of the elephant, and the tail of a goat." Aelian describes it as a solitary animal with a very dissonant voice, and many modern historians believe he is describing a rhinoceros. Pliny the Elder described unicorns in similar terms. Among them, Ctesias, Aristotle, Aelian, and Pliny state that the unicorn is similar to the ass, horse, antelope, and goat, providing most of the ingredients for later conceptions of the animal.

Aristotle and Pliny were considered towering authorities on many subjects for over a thousand years, so their writings carried unicorn lore well into the Middle Ages. But no text from antiquity could be more influential in keeping unicorn lore alive than the Bible, for the Latin and Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible familiar to all Christians in the Middle Ages mention the unicorn several times. This biblical unicorn seems to originate with a mistranslation. The seventy-two Jewish scholars of Alexandria who first translated the Bible into Greek chose to translate the Hebrew word *re'em* as "monokeros," literally "one-horn." This became "unicornis" in both the Old Latin Bible and some passages of the vulgate Bible, and "unicorn" in the King James Bible. It is now fairly clear that the word *re'em* in fact referred to a wild ox or aurochs, and most modern English translations reflect this correction. Nevertheless, the older translations were literally taken as gospel throughout Christendom for over a thousand years, making belief in unicorns an article of faith among believers.

A lion attacking a one-horned animal, from ancient Persepolis

A Virgin, a Lion, and a Poisoned Pool: The Medieval and Renaissance Unicorn

As the world of antiquity gave way to the Middle Ages, the unicorn gained in fame and popularity. In fact, medieval and Renaissance stories of the unicorn became so popular that in 1612 Petrus Plancius included a unicorn constellation, Monoceros, on his celestial globe, enshrining the magical beast in the stars.

Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, one belief about the unicorn from Ctesias's earliest description remained the most important: its horn was a cure for all poisons and diseases. Variations on the tale also existed; in Wolfram von Eschenbach's Grail Romance, *Parzival*, the healing implement is a jewel found at the base of the unicorn's horn. By the Renaissance, the story had grown so that the horn was said to sweat in the presence of poison, making it a poison-detector as well as an antidote. Wealthy people went to great lengths to procure what they believed to be the horns of unicorns, largely for their supposed medicinal value. Most of the "unicorns' horns" on the European market were actually the tusks of the narwhal, a whale that grows one long, twisted tooth resembling a horn. Through the demand for narwhal tusks, the unicorn belief affected international trade. Narwhals are rarely seen any further south than Greenland, and therefore they were hunted only by Scandinavian whalers. These canny sea-hunters kept the secret of the strange whale's existence for nearly five hundred years, protecting their supply while they sold the tusks as unicorns' horns. By the sixteenth century, many Europeans knew that there existed a "sea unicorn," but knew little else about it; by then, a narwhal's tusk was worth several times its weight in gold.

Because of the widespread belief in the healing horn, from the Middle Ages until the eighteenth century, the unicorn was the most common and recognizable symbol of an apothecary or pharmacy. Apothecaries hung elaborate signs shaped like unicorns outside their shops. Some still survive, includ-

ing at the famous "White Unicorn" Pharmacy at Klatovy, Czech Republic, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Apart from the crucial belief in the healing horn, three stories about unicorns came to be particularly popular in medieval times. The first was that the unicorn could only be captured with the help of a virgin. This idea was expressed in the book of animal lore called the *Physiologus*, or later, the *Bestiary*. Compiled during late antiquity and popular throughout Europe during the Middle Ages, the *Physiologus* existed in many versions. In one version, the unicorn, an animal "the size of a small kid" can only be caught this way: "Hunters place a chaste virgin before him. He bounds forth into her lap and she warms and nourishes the animal and takes him into the palace of kings." (*Physiologus* p. 51) Because of this story, the unicorn was often a symbol of chastity.

A fifteenth-century tapestry chair-covering showing a unicorn and a wild woman

However, the unicorn was also occasionally portrayed as a sexual beast. In a version of the virgin-capture story from the Syriac variant of the *Physiologus*, "they lead forth a young virgin, pure and chaste, to whom, when the animal sees her, he approaches, throwing himself upon her. Then the girl offers him her breasts, and the animal begins to suck the breasts of the maiden and to conduct himself familiarly with her." (Shepard p. 49) In an interesting reversal of this idea, the French Arthurian romance *The Knight of the Parrot* features a female unicorn that suckles a human baby along with her own litter. Unicorns are also often shown in conjunction with naked "wild men" and "wild women," which is suggestive of sexuality. And most explicitly of all, Rabelais says that a unicorn's horn is usually limp, "like a turkey-cock's comb" (Rabelais p. 343), but can be made to stand erect when the unicorn needs it.

The second influential unicorn tale incorporates the healing horn idea, but fleshes it out into a specific story. In this story, recounted in the Greek versions of the *Physiologus*, a serpent poisons a pool or stream, so that the other animals are unable to drink. The unicorn arrives, dips his horn into the water, and thus counteracts the poison, making the water safe again.

The virgin-capture and the poisoned pool are both illustrated in *The Unicorn Tapestries*, a magnificent series of late-medieval Belgian wall hangings, now on display at the Cloisters Museum in New York. The second tapestry in the series shows the unicorn dipping its horn in the stream to counteract the poison, while other animals look on. The fifth tapestry, which now exists only as two small fragments, shows the unicorn with a young maiden, who is gesturing to a huntsman; the huntsman is blowing his horn, and one of his dogs is leaping on the unicorn. The rich tapestry series is a good indication that these very popular stories had become part of everyday knowledge about unicorns in late medieval Europe.

The *Physiologus* makes both of these stories into Christian allegory; the book's commentaries on the virgin-capture make the Unicorn a symbol of Christ, a great celestial hero who came to Earth through the intercession of a mild virgin. The second story emphasizes the unicorn's sacrifice, his service to the other animals, and his opposition to the serpent, who represents Satan. But others who told the stories were more concerned with practical meanings; many people, including the famed abbess Hildegard von Bingen, debated the proper way to use virgins in the capture of a unicorn, and some people even claimed to have seen a unicorn heal a poisoned pool with their own eyes, as Johannes Hesse did on a trip to the Holy Land in 1389.

A third medieval story about the unicorn concerns its relationship with the lion. It seems to derive from the "Letter of Prester John," a document purporting to be from the court of a Christian king in Ethiopia. The letter, which dates to about 1165, claims that the unicorn and the lion are natural enemies, and that the lion kills the unicorn by a subtle ruse: it positions itself between the unicorn and a tree, and when the unicorn charges, it leaps aside. The unicorn's horn is thus plunged into the tree, and the unicorn cannot withdraw it. The unicorn is trapped, and the lion easily kills it. This tale, too, entered folklore, sometimes as a general association of the unicorn with the lion, sometimes as a memory of their great rivalry, and other times as a specific method of killing or capturing unicorns.

The association between the animals is clear in another celebrated series of unicorn tapestries, known as *The Lady and the Unicorn,* currently on display at the Cluny museum in Paris. In these, a lady is attended by a number of animals, the largest and most important of which are a lion and a unicorn. The rivalry between the animals became particularly important in Britain, where the lion came to represent England and the unicorn Scotland. An English nursery rhyme, perhaps bearing an echo of Prester John's letter, runs:

The lion and the unicorn were fighting for the crown.
The lion beat the unicorn all around the town.
Some gave them white bread and some gave them brown;
Some gave them plum cake and drummed them out of town.

With the ascension of the Scottish monarch James I to the throne of England in 1603, the lion-unicorn rivalry was reconciled in a British context (at least officially), and the two animals appear as supporters of the shield on the Coat of Arms of the United Kingdom.

The lion's specific method of killing the unicorn in the Prester John text also remained well-known in both learned and popular circles. Spenser tells the story in full, thus:

Like as a Lyon whose imperial powre
A proud rebellious Unicorn defyes,
T'avoid the rash assault and wrathful stowre
Of his fiers foe, him to a tree applyes,
And when him ronning in full course he spyes
He slips aside: the whiles that furious beast
His precious horne, sought of his enemyes,
Strikes in the stocke, ne thence can be releast….

—(Faerie Queen, Book ii, Canto v, Stanza 10)

Shakespeare alludes to the unicorn several times; most famously in a line from Act II, scene i of *Julius Caesar:* "He loves to hear that unicorns may be betrayed with trees." The idea turns up in eighteenth-century German oral tradition in the tale of the "Brave Little Tailor," collected by the Brothers Grimm, in which the tailor uses the same ruse to capture a unicorn. In the southern mountains of the United States, the folktale hero Jack still catches unicorns the same way, for example in both Ray and Orville Hicks's versions of "Jack and the Varmints."

How ancient are these medieval unicorn beliefs? Shepard points out that the ancient city of Persepolis, built in about 515 B.C., contains friezes and reliefs that were probably copies of even older Babylonian sources. Several of these show a lion and a one-horned animal locked in combat. Furthermore, both Brown and Shepard point to the "three-legged ass," a creature from the *Bundahishn*, or Zoroastrian creation myth, which is said to have one horn, and to purify the waters with that horn, in order to undo poison placed there by servants of evil. Because this text was compiled in the seventh century A.D., but reflects ideas at least a thousand years older, it is hard to date this occurrence of the poisoned-pool story. However, since Zoroastrianism was widespread in Persia when Ctesias lived there, it seems likely that his "Indian ass" was based on some version of this myth.

An Ark, a Schmendrick, and a Fallen Star: The Modern Unicorn

As we've already seen, the unicorn didn't die out in the Middle Ages, but continues to roam through our literature, art, and culture. Some tales exist in different versions, as modern folklore. One example is the story that unicorns died out because they literally "missed the boat" when Noah was loading the Ark: told by C. S. Lewis in a 1948 poem, by Edward D. Hoch in a 1958 short story, by Shel Silverstein in a 1962 song, and by Geraldine McCaughrean in a 1997 children's book. In each of these variants, the reason the unicorn misses the boat is different. In Lewis's, Noah's lazy son Ham refuses to let the unicorn aboard, and Noah's lament for the beast draws parallels between the unicorn and Christ: "O noble and unmated beast, my sons were all unkind/In such a night what stable and what manger will you find?" In the Hoch story, the greed of the unicorns' owner prevents Noah's son Shem from buying the beasts. In the Silverstein song (a #7 chart hit for the Irish Rovers in 1968), the unicorns are foolish and playful, and fail to enter the Ark in time. In the McCaughrean book, the unicorns are too noble, and spend too much time helping the other animals.

This story, too, may have its basis in older traditions. There is a section of the Jewish Talmud (p. 23) describing the difficulties Noah had loading an animal called the *orzila* into the Ark; it is thought that the *orzila* is the same as the *re'em*, and once again, it has often been translated as "unicorn." Although in the Talmudic tale the animal does not perish (he is lashed to the ark by his horn and survives), it is just possible that the Talmud lies at the origin of the multifaceted legend of Noah and the unicorn.

Probably the best-loved modern fantasy work featuring unicorns is Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*. Set in a medieval fairy tale realm, the novel tells the story of a unicorn who learns that the others of her kind have disappeared, and who sets out to find and free them. Beagle recounts many traditional unicorn stories, including the virgin-capture. His unicorn wields the traditional healing horn, which can even revive the dead. Beagle's unicorn fights a magical Red Bull, who has driven all the other unicorns into the sea, and this carries echoes of the traditional lion-combat. At the same time, the story is a coming-of-age tale for Prince Lir, who is young, and for the Unicorn, Schmendrick the Magician, and Molly Grue, who are not; all four characters must sacrifice, learn and grow. The animated film presents a simpler version of the story, but is notable for beautiful images of unicorns based on medieval tapestries

and illuminated manuscripts. In addition to *The Last Unicorn*, Beagle has published "Two Hearts," a sequel that reveals the fate of Lir, Schmendrick, Molly, and the Unicorn. He has also written *The Unicorn Sonata*, set in a different world and featuring a different kind of unicorn; "Julie's Unicorn," a story about Beagle's popular character Joe Farrell, featuring a miniature unicorn; and *The Last Unicorn: The Lost Version*, which was his first, abandoned attempt to write what became his most popular novel.

Many modern fantasy authors borrow the medieval lore of the unicorn and weave it deftly into their own stories. Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess, for example, mine medieval folklore quite deeply in their illustrated novel *Stardust*, including all three of the most popular medieval stories: the combat with the lion, the virgin-capture, and the healing horn. After the hero, Tristran Thorne, saves a unicorn from its enemy the lion, the grateful unicorn lays his head in the lap of Tristran's virginal companion, the star-maiden Yvaine, and agrees to be their steed. The unicorn later neutralizes a poisoned cup of wine with his horn, and valiantly defends the young couple against an evil witch. In the end, the witch kills the beast, beheads him, and saws off his horn for its medicinal value…a sad end for such a noble character. (The film version includes the unicorn briefly, but not his horrible fate.) A similarly gruesome unicorn slaying occurs in T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, after Gawaine and his brothers use a virgin to entrap the magical beast.

Other fantasists play at the margins of medieval stories. Lewis Carroll includes the lion and unicorn fighting for the crown in *Through the Looking Glass*, but whether he knew of the nursery rhyme's connection with older stories is impossible to say. Tracy Chevalier recounts traditional unicorn lore, slanted through the agendas of her narrators, in *The Lady and the Unicorn*, a historical novel about the creation of the magnificent Cluny tapestries. Sharan Newman, in *Guinevere*, plays with the virgin-capture theme by having her unicorn become psychically and emotionally connected to Guinevere; Newman's unicorn is pledged to one virgin only, and dies as soon as Guinevere loses her innocence. Theodore Sturgeon, in his classic story "The Silken-Swift," challenges our notions of innocence by having the unicorn eschew a technically virginal but spiritually corrupt maiden in favor of a young rape victim who is innocent and kind. And C. S. Lewis, rather than borrowing medieval plots, borrows medieval Christian allegorical meanings; in *The Last Battle*, the noble unicorn Jewel serves the Christ-like figure of Aslan the lion.

Royal Coat of Arms of the United Kingdom

Many authors use unicorns as cosmic symbols of peace, prosperity, and order. In Roger Zelazny's Amber novels, a mystical unicorn is the living embodiment of the principle of order, while a serpent embodies chaos, ideas which would seem at home in the pages of the *Bundahishn*. In the fantasy film *Legend*, two mated unicorns are the keepers of the world's light and warmth; when one is killed, the world experiences premature winter, and if the other should be killed, it will cause eternal night. And Madeleine L'Engle's *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* introduces powerful, time-traveling unicorns who serve good against evil, peace against war, and joy against despair.

In still other works, unicorns have characteristics completely unknown to traditional lore. In Piers Anthony's Apprentice Adept novels, the unicorns are a bizarre mix of wit and whimsy: they are intelligent, multicolored shape-changers, and can play music with their horns. In Roger Zelazny's "The Unicorn Variations," the unicorn lives in a dimension filled with mythical creatures like griffins and bigfoots, is adept at chess, and loves a cold beer. Bruce Coville's Unicorn Chronicles feature intelligent unicorns who have a society of their own. And, of course, dozens of other fantasy classics, including Robert Asprin's Myth series, Terry Brooks's Landover novels, and J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, feature unicorns as supporting characters or generic "magical creatures."

What is the future of the unicorn? Unless we discover unicorns on another planet, as The Three Stooges did in the film *Have Rocket, Will Travel;* unless we create unicorns through genetic engineering, as in Vonda N. McIntyre's "Elfleda" or Gene Wolfe's "The Woman the Unicorn Loved"; unless we discover, in the forests of Vietnam, a one-horned version of the *Pseudoryx nghetinhensis*—can the unicorn still have any place in our future?

Of course it can. What is the unicorn but the Holy Grail of animals, to be sought by all but found by few? If there are things worth having faith in, why not the unicorn? As Edward Topsell put it in his 1607 bestiary, "God himself must needs be traduced, if there is no unicorn in the world."

Or better yet, as Lewis Carroll's unicorn said to Alice: "…if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you. Is that a bargain?" ❧

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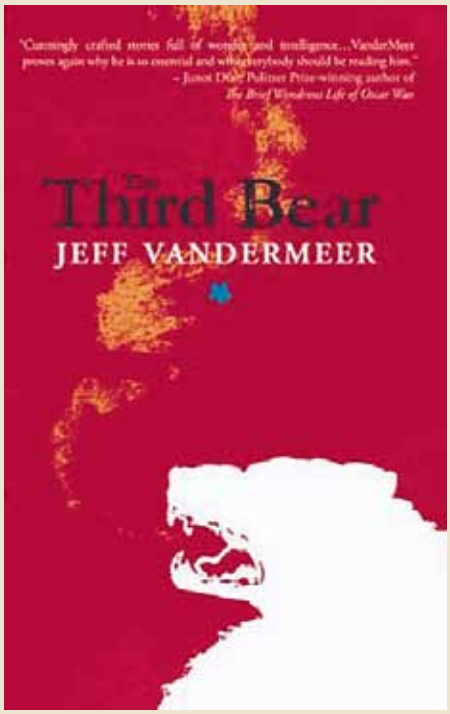
December 2010 Reviews: The Third Bear, Twelve, Salute the Dark, Burton and Swinburne in: The Strange Affair of Spring Heeled Jack, Who Fears Death

by Paul Witcover & Elizabeth Bear

The fourteen stories in Jeff VanderMeer's new collection, ***The Third Bear*** (Tachyon Publications, trade paperback, 288 pp., $14.95, ISBN: 978-1892391988)—fifteen, if one counts the afterword, which does indeed contain an extra story—illustrate the range and playfulness of this multitalented writer, whose novels evince a curious affinity for mutant mushrooms, squids, and meerkats, among other oddities biological and otherwise. VanderMeer can be literary—he is obviously well-acquainted with the works of Kafka, Borges, and Nabokov, for example, and is not shy about letting the influence show—but he can also be silly, even downright ridiculous (as could they). As well, there is a political seriousness to his work that reflects a deep aversion to the course of American policy post-9/11—this visceral disgust was pronounced in his most recent novel, *Finch*, and is present in many of these stories as well, often entering their fantastic landscapes from oblique and surprising angles. The result is a strong collection whose stories, written between 2004 and 2009, and all previously published save for one, "The Quickening," run the gamut from the whimsical to the horrific, and showcase VanderMeer's wide range both of subject and style.



That previously unpublished story, of a young orphan girl's unlikely friendship with a talking rabbit named Sensio, definitely falls into the latter category. Set in rural Florida in the 1950s, "The Quickening" could almost be a naturalistic fiction, so sharply observed and reported are the squalid and tawdry details of twelve-year-old Rachel's life with her aunt Etta, a vinegary prune-hearted battleaxe who has assumed guardianship of her niece for pecuniary reasons and who sees the advent of a talking rabbit in similar terms. This could easily have become a kind of moralistic fable in lesser hands, but VanderMeer makes it a sad and mysterious visitation of the magical into a world so straitened and colorless it cannot long contain it. If Flannery O'Connor had set out to write *Harvey*, the result might have resembled this strangely moving story.

"The Goat Variations" is the most overtly political in the collection, recapitulating the famous moment when George W. Bush, in the midst of reading *My Pet Goat* to a classroom of schoolchildren, was informed of the attacks on the World Trade Center, exposing to the world a timorous vacuity that the rest of his presidency would seek to bury under bellicose bravado. Here, across a multitude of dimensions fanned out like a hand of playing cards, VanderMeer jumps between alternate versions of Bush, some of which inhabit distinctly Lovecraftian worlds, and one of whom, if I might put it so, is "our" Bush, all of them however seemingly subservient or folded into an über-Bush whose consciousness of his doppelgängers and their multiversal crimes has rendered him both impotent and insane.

In some of the stories, such as "Appoggiatura," which originally appeared in the anthology *Logorrhea*, whose contributors were invited to riff on obscure or just plain interesting words, VanderMeer's taste for postmodern literary gamesmanship predominates—taking a formal constraining structure and warping it into surprising new shapes, somewhat along the lines of the French *Oulipo* group of writers like Georges Perec. Here the result, while requiring both a dictionary and a thesaurus as reading aids, is a tangled self-referential tour-de-force…but one that may strike some readers as self-indulgent. I think this is a charge that could be leveled against much of VanderMeer's fiction, and the question of whether he is to be regarded as a talented trickster or a serious artist depends on how you interpret the undeniably recursive and self-referential qualities of his work: whether you see them as egoistic indulgences or as the indispensable illustrations of a philosophy of fiction. I fall into the latter camp, but I do recognize that some readers will find this aspect of VanderMeer's work off-putting.

One of the highlights of the collection, and my personal favorite, is "The Situation," a deadpan but hilarious evocation of bureaucratic insanity that reads like a cross between Kafka and Lovecraft. Set in a postapocalyptic future in which humanity has been succeeded by mutated hybrids of flesh and plastic and other unlikely ingredients, the story takes the form of memoranda written in retrospect by a disgruntled employee of a firm that creates bizarre biologically based mechanisms for the storage and conveyance of information, such as a project to design a

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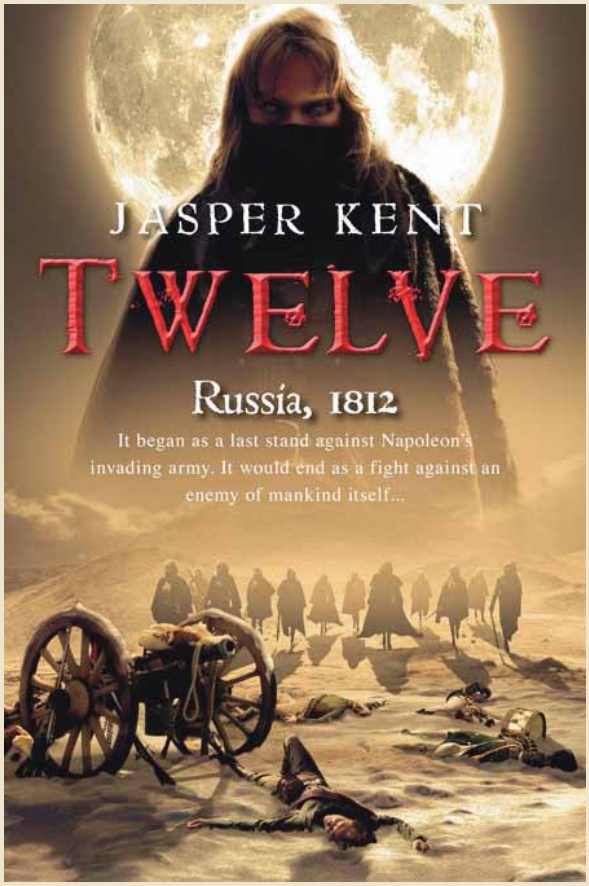
fish that will swallow students whole and, "deep in the fish's guts," subject them to "a number of neural stimuli, some to do with proper social adjustment, but most further enhancing their math/science skills." These memoranda detail the Machiavellian power games going on between management and employees. The satirical mimicry of educational and corporate jargon is spot-on, but when combined with the surreal and horrific elements that VanderMeer introduces with evident glee, the result is a hybrid story as strange as any of the creations it contains…yet not so strange that we do not recognize the truths it harbors, or see some reflection, however fragmentary, of ourselves there. It's his ability to convey that moment of recognition, which occurs somehow not despite the strangeness but because of it, which I think marks VanderMeer as a truly distinctive and important talent.

—Review by Paul Witcover


JASPER KENT
TWELVE
Russia, 1812
It began as a last stand against Napoleon's invading army. It would end as a fight against an enemy of mankind itself...

Lou Anders, the editorial director of Pyr, has become quite adept at spotting new talent from across the pond and importing it to these shores. His latest find is Jasper Kent, whose first novel, ***Twelve*** (Pyr, trade paperback, 458 pp., $17.00, ISBN: 978-1616142414), has already been published in England, along with its sequel, *Thirteen Years Later* (slated for US publication in 2011). I don't always agree with Anders's taste, but in this case I think he's found a winner—albeit with some qualifications, which I'll get to momentarily.

Even if *Twelve* sucked, which it doesn't, the setting and central idea would by themselves be worthy of praise on general grounds of coolness. The year is 1812, the setting: outside the gates of Moscow, as the Grand Army of Napoleon closes in. With defeat looming, the desperate defenders of the city and the czar turn to an unlikely—indeed, ungodly—group of allies: twelve mercenaries who hail from, oh, the environs of Transylvania. On the one hand, Kent serves up a historical novel with a smattering of Tolstoy—the scenes from *War and Peace,* wherein a deranged Pierre Bezukhov remains in occupied Moscow, spring to mind more than once—and Stoker's *Dracula* …for Kent makes no attempt to keep the nature of the twelve mercenaries, whom the Russians call Oprichniki, after the secret police of Ivan the Terrible, a secret from readers: they are vampires, or, to use the Russian term, *voordalak*. A gang of bloodthirsty vampires operating as partisans against the invading French army, both in its investment of Moscow and its long, and long-suffering, retreat—I don't know about you, but that setup makes my mouth water.

It gets better. Not all the Russians are aware of the nature of their allies—and when they do become hip to it, a gulf opens between those who feel that the defense of the homeland mitigates any sin in the employment of such evil creatures, and those who feel that common humanity outweighs any tactical advantage conferred by utilizing these inhuman killing machines. Suddenly there is a moral dimension to the horror that resonates in interesting ways with certain decisions of successive American governments in the War on Terror. That makes this novel, as the best historical novels are, as much about our own time as it is about the time in which it is set.

The Oprichniki are summoned by Dmitry Fetyukovich, who belongs to a small band of what we would today call special-forces soldiers: four handpicked men who act, when necessary, as spies, commandos, assassins. Though the group is led by Vadim Fyodorovich, the individual members have some freedom of action, which is how Dmitry, who encountered the Oprichniki years earlier, during a particularly bloody war against the Turk, was able to take the initiative and send for them; when he receives word that they are coming, he presents Vadim with a *fait accompli*. Vadim and the other commandos—Maksim Sergeivich and Aleksei Ivanovich—are skeptical that a squad of foreign fighters can make a difference against so numerous an adversary, but Dmitry assures him they can. Each one, he says, is the equal of ten Cossacks.

One problem with Kent's approach is that readers know the nature of the Oprichniki from the outset, while the main characters—including the narrator, Aleksei—are maddeningly slow to understand what is going on, despite circumstances that should make it obvious. This is the same problem that afflicts so many horror movies, in which the protagonists lose the sympathy of viewers because their actions proclaim them to be dense, if not downright stupid. The pace of the novel prior to the tipping point where Aleksei, at least, grasps the truth about his grim allies is plodding, and that tipping point takes far too long to arrive. But when it does, the pace picks up considerably, and the moral dimension of the novel flowers—and it's that dimension which re-

ally distinguishes this book from typical vampire fare.

Aleksei is a sympathetic character, a flawed hero whose loyalties are personal, idiosyncratic, perhaps even illogical, but strongly held because they are from the heart. He is a husband and father—his wife and son, both of whom he loves fiercely, are in Petersburg—yet he becomes romantically involved with a prostitute who goes variously by the names Domnikiia and Dominique, depending on the preferences of her clients for either a good Russian girl or a saucy French whore. Domnikiia, too, is a very likable character—by no means the stereotypical whore with a heart of gold, she is instead a tough and shrewd survivor, though not without her own flaws, and to earn her respect and her heart, as Aleksei does, is a real accomplishment…one he understands very well he may not be worthy of.

Rumors of plague precede and—as Aleksei will recognize in retrospect—track the arrival of the Oprichniki, thirteen dour individuals who, with two exceptions, resemble convicts more than soldiers, and beasts more than men. The exceptions are their leader, a charismatic but creepy old man who calls himself Zmyeevich, which translates to "son of the serpent," and a tall, blond-haired man who stands out among the rest like Lucifer among lesser devils and goes by the suggestive name of Iuda, or Judas. In fact, all the Oprichniki, with the exception of Zmyeevich, bear the names of Apostles, and when Zmyeevich departs, having delivered his men as promised, and claiming that he is too old for such adventures—which, given his evident vitality, seems unlikely—he leaves the twelve remaining Oprichniki under the command of—who else?—Pyetr.

Kent's vampires are as much indebted to Rice and *Buffy* as to Stoker. They are vulnerable to sunlight and to wooden stakes, but such items as crosses and holy water prove less efficacious against them. They are stronger and faster than humans, with Dracula's uncanny ability to cling to and climb sheer walls, but they are, for the most part, diminished in intellect: they are brutes, not Byrons.

Aleksei and Dmitry are close friends; Dmitry once saved Aleksei's life, and Aleksei's five-year-old son bears Dmitry's name. Yet their friendship will be strained to the breaking point and beyond by those two age-old questions: What did he know, and when did he know it. For the extent of Dmitry's complicity in the gruesome work of the vampires will take on real urgency when the killers begin to exercise less restraint and discrimination in the choice of their victims—moving from a diet of French soldiers to a more varied banquet that includes the very people they have ostensibly come to save.

But the relationship of Aleksei and Dmitry is only one corner of the triangle that serves as the sturdy foundation of Kent's plot; the second corner is the relationship of Aleksei and Domnikiia; and the third, which comes to dominate the other two, holding the triangle together structurally, as it were, is the strange and intense rivalry, which is also a twisted courtship, that springs up between Aleksei and the blond-haired Oprichniki, Iuda.

Iuda has more personality than the other vampires; he seems more intelligent, driven by refinements of cruelty the others are too degraded to relish or even recognize. He seems, much more than Pyetr, a worthy lieutenant to Zmyeevich himself. The bond that links Aleksei and Iuda reminded me of that between the two antagonists in Conrad's classic story of obsession, also set in the Napoleonic wars, "The Duel," which traces a series of duels between two French officers, D'Hubert and Feraud, who are, as the title punningly implies, aspects of each other, yet who also come to dominate, or rather to symbolize, the war of which they are a small, even insignificant, part. So, too, does the quarrel between Iuda and Aleksei come to dominate *Twelve*, and it is here that Kent is truly inventive, though in a way that readers may feel, as I did, does not hold up well to sober reflection. That's a shame, because I think, with a little more care, he could have made it—and I'm not going to spoil what, exactly, "it" consists of—more believable. In the heat of the action such objections may be easily brushed aside, but they return, stronger than ever, once the action is over and the novel set down. Still, *Twelve* is a strong and original debut by a talented young writer who brings fresh psychological and moral sophistication to his subject.

—Review by Paul Witcover

Another winner from Lou Anders and Pyr, which regular readers will know I have been reviewing in successive columns, is the Shadows of the Apt series by Adrian Tchaikovsky. Now, with the fourth installment, ***Salute the Dark*** (Pyr, trade paperback, 324 pp., $16.00, ISBN: 978-1616142391), the series does not so much reach a conclusion as pause briefly to catch its breath. Book five, after all, is already out in England, and book six is not far behind.

Pyr's accelerated publishing schedule has permitted me the luxury of reviewing these novels almost in real time, as they appear in bookstores. This has had a positive impact, as the characters and events have remained fresh in my mind from book to book, and I've been able to appreciate the grand unfolding arc of the story; usually, when a year or more goes by between the publication of each new volume in a series, many important details, and even just atmospheric effects, have faded from my mind. Such are the burdens of increasing age and the nonstop reading schedule of a book reviewer!

But I do wonder about the impact on the writer of this kind of publication schedule. It's not just Pyr but Tchaikovsky's British publisher (Tor UK) that bears responsibility for applying such a demanding, not to say punishing, pace. Good writing cannot be rushed; it imposes its own pace. But when that pace is imposed from without, strains begin to show. Such has been the case with the Shadows of the Apt, I'm sorry to say. I noticed it creeping into the third book, *Blood of the Mantis*, and it is even more evident in *Salute the Dark*. For the most part, the result is not sloppy writing. On a sentence-by-sentence level, Tchaikovsky

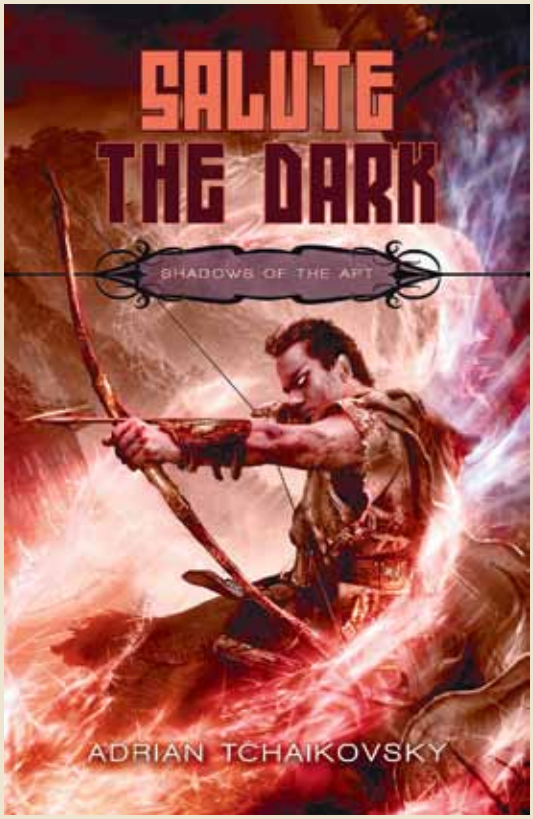
keeps the quality high. But scene by scene, chapter by chapter, a kind of sketchiness is now evident. Corners are being cut. Scenes that deserve a fuller treatment are abbreviated; actions important to the plot take place offstage, as it were, and are referred to only in passing; journeys from point A to point B, which require substantial time, and cover substantial distance, and may therefore be deemed full of incidents worthy of elaboration—especially since time and distance are such integral factors in the plot already, as the success or failure of a multi-pronged offensive by Wasp armies depends on the precise orchestration of events widely separated in space and time—are completed as if in the blink of an eye. Important psychological developments, evolutions of character, are rushed or insufficiently prepared. Many times, I felt that I was reading essentially a synopsis of what this book deserved to be, a skeleton insufficiently fleshed out.

But not always. Not even mostly. Just enough to detract from what is in any case a fine novel…but should have been a better one. The author's talent, his world-building skills, the bar he raised in the previous novels of the series—all these things imposed an obligation of excellence, and I felt disappointed that, whether as a result of his publishing schedule or not, Tchaikovsky didn't meet that obligation. Slow down, Mr. Tchaikovsky! You have your whole career ahead of you, and it can be a significant one if you take care not to squander your considerable talents.

Okay, let me step off my soapbox and get on with the review.… SPOILERS AHEAD: BE WARNED.

The Shadow Box containing the last remnants of some very powerful, very bad magic from the previous age of Tchaikovsky's brilliantly imagined world has fallen into the hands of Uctebri, the Mosquito-kinden sorcerer who plans to use it in some unspecified but doubtless horrible way to dispose of the Wasp emperor, Alvdan II, and place upon the throne the emperor's sister, Seda, who is to serve as Uctebri's puppet. Seda, who has spent her life in the ominous shadow of her mad brother, with the threat of murder hanging over her every minute, has plans of her own.

Meanwhile, the Wasp armies are pressing their attack throughout the Lowlands, and have even reached the gates of Collegium, the center of culture and learning, from whence Stenwold Maker, the Beetle-kinden engineer and spymaster, has long warned of their coming. Now Stenwold embarks on a desperate journey into the unknown lands of the Commonweal, ruled by the mysterious Dragonfly-kinden, an ancient race still wrapped in the somnolent, aristocratic magics that the Lowlands kinden threw off violently centuries ago.



Salme, a prince of the Commonweal sent to Collegium as a student and spy, who became in turn a spy and agent for Stenwold, has, with his lover, Prized of Dragons, one of the rare Butterfly-kinden, knit the refugees and deserters left in the train of the Wasp armies into a partisan fighting force that is harassing the Wasp forces outside the Ant-kinden city of Sarn. Now he will embark on his most dangerous mission yet to save that beleaguered city.

Tisamon, the Mantis-kinden Weaponsmaster, driven insane by a love he cannot acknowledge, has embarked on his own version of a suicide mission—a mission that will take him across the Wasp empire from arena to arena, until he ends up in Capitas, the Wasp capital. His daughter, Tynisia, follows in an equally desperate and probably doomed attempt to forestall her father before he can throw away his life in a meaningless gesture.

Cheerwell Maker, Stenwold's niece, and Thalric, the renegade Wasp intelligence officer, who fights against his own people not from conviction but out of self-preservation, for they have wrongly declared him a traitor and will kill him without hesitation if he gives them a chance, make their way to the city of Myna, hoping to stoke a rebellion against the occupying Wasp forces that will slow the implacable Wasp advances elsewhere.

These are but a handful of the many plot lines that Tchaikovsky attempts to juggle in this novel. Even were he at the top of his game, doubtless a few of them would fall; but in light of the problems identified above, more than just a few come crashing down…or remain implausibly aloft, defying gravity or becoming swallowed into thin air.

As the novel nears its end, the rush to tie up loose ends and bring characters into their foreordained positions, both physically and psychologically, imparts a sense of frantic movement that does some violence to the naturally expansive inclinations of the overall story and its characters. In other words, Tchaikovsky's novel wants to be bigger, fuller, just when he is determined, for extraneous reasons, to cut it down to size. The result is that the climax—or, rather, the series of smaller climaxes, involving particular characters, that leads to the grand climax of the first four books of the series—feels somewhat…anticlimactic.

Mark Hodder's debut novel, the elaborately titled ***Burton and Swinburne in: The Strange Affair of Spring Heeled Jack*** is the latest offering in the current steampunk explosion. It's blurbed and introduced by Michael Moorcock, which should give the astute reader a fairly good clue what the novel is like.

Spring Heeled Jack, as I will call it for convenience's sake, is an adventure romp that overall feels more like a graphic novel. While reading it, I kept finding myself drawing comparisons to *Freakangels* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. If I had to give an elevator pitch for this book, I would call it *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* only with real rather than fictional characters. It has that same episodic feel, as the pacing carries us from one portentous event to another with little in the way of transitions between.

The book concerns itself with the adventures of one Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton, explorer and scientist, and his friend, the masochistic would-be poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, as they attempt to track down the source of a pack of genetically engineered loup-garou who are kidnapping chimney-sweeps from among the wretched rookeries of a nineteenth-century England in which Victoria died at the age of twenty and, with the advance of science, London has been overrun by the sorts of mutated creatures and infernal mechanisms that might arise from the imagination of H. G. Wells.

Among the book's many delights are a carefully crafted mystery plot, a lot of very zany (and broadly played) characters, and the author's wacky inventiveness with modes of transportation. (Giant box kites drawn by genetically engineered swans are the least of it.)

I think the solution to the *Spring Heeled Jack* subplot is too widely drawn, because I figured it out almost at once, and thus the very long section wherein we are told all about what happened seemed to drag. Also, this is not a book to turn to for nuance of characterization or moral insight, and it is my considered opinion that it's time for the Evil Albino trope to go the way of the Magical Negro.

But those quibbles aside, it is an entertaining book.

—Review by Elizabeth Bear

It would be wrong to call Nnedi Okorafor's new novel entertaining, exactly. A most-definitely adult novel by an author previously well-known for her children's work, ***Who Fears Death*** (Daw Books, hardcover, $24.95, ISBN 978-0756406172) is an unflinching examination of the horrors and joys of a postapocalyptic desert state that is in the throes of a genocidal war so old that its roots stretch back to myth.

It's the coming-of-age story of a girl named Onyesonwu—which means, as you may have guessed, "Who fears death?" She is the child of a political rape whose purpose was to force her mother to bear a mixed-blood child, and as such she is ostracized and marginalized by everyone she meets. But Onyesonwu has the potential to become a powerful sorceress and save her Okeke people from genocide by the dominant Nuru, if she can only convince an elder sorcerer to teach her.

She moves through a world in which a farm-village technology is still haunted with artifacts of the past. Computers are commonplace, and there are various devices that allow the characters to live in a harsh desert world. But this world also allows the use of magic—and quite blatant, powerful magic at that.

This book has been widely hailed as a vastly important novel, and I agree that it deserves to be read and considered. It deals very directly with issues of gender and genocide, culture and class, in ways that fantasy too often simplifies. In that respect, and as a Bildungsroman, it is an unqualified success. It is also an unqualified success when it comes to reinventing the quest novel in an underexploited venue.

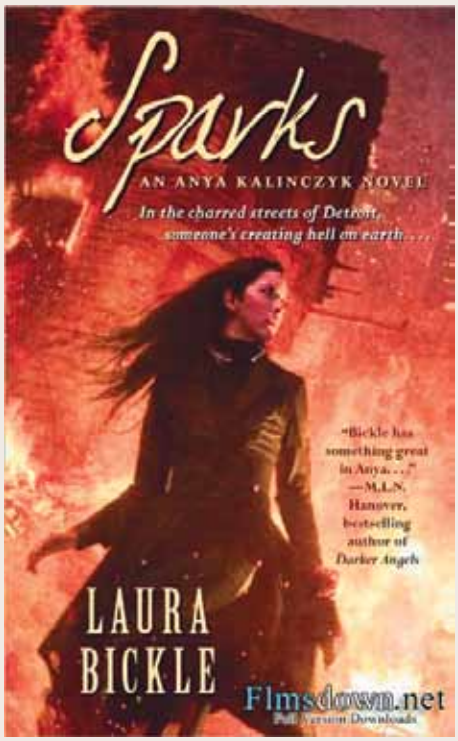
The plot, alas, is somewhat weaker. In terms of its structure, *Who Fears Death* is a very standard chosen-one quest narrative, and it suffers from a problem I've noticed in some of Okorafor's other work: the protagonist seems to exist mostly to move through the world and describe it, and other characters have a way of making this unrealistically convenient for her. Onyesonwu is more goal-oriented than Zahrah of *Zahrah the Windseeker*, but she still feels rather drifty overall.

It's a small flaw in a thoughtful work, however, and I highly recommend this one.

—Review by Elizabeth Bear ❧

December 2010 Book Reviews: Sparks, Dark Oracle, A Wild Light

by Elizabeth Bear


Sparks
AN ANYA KALINCZYK NOVEL
In the charred streets of Detroit, someone's creating hell on earth....
"Bickle has something great in Anya..."
—M.L.N. Hanover, bestselling author of Darker Angels
LAURA BICKLE
Flmsdown.net

This bi-mester, we start off with two novels representing different pseudonyms of the same author. The books are Laura Bickle's ***Sparks*** (Juno, mass-market paperback, 362 pages, $7.99, ISBN 978-1439167687) and Alayna Williams's ***Dark Oracle*** (Juno, mass-market paperback, 336 pages, $7.99, ISBN 978-1439182796).

Sparks is a direct sequel to Bickle's first novel, *Embers*, which is one of the most promising first novels I've read in a long time, inviting comparison to Emma Bull's early classic, *War for the Oaks*. Like its predecessor, *Sparks* concerns itself with the adventures of Anya Kalinczyk, Detroit-area arson investigator and "Lantern," a sort of medium to whom ghosts are irresistibly drawn. She sidelines as a ghost hunter with a crew of misfits, and her days are complicated by her relationship with her salamander familiar, Sparky, who has a tendency to crisp or burn out various electronic devices through his overeager curiosity.

Second novels often suffer in comparison to firsts: they often get a little less attention, and may be the first book an author has to produce under deadline pressure. And while I can't say for certain that's what happened here, I have to admit that *Sparks* is not as strong a book as *Embers*. Unfortunately, Bickle recycles some plot tropes that were more engaging the first time—the shopping expedition as character development, for example, feels like a retread of a similar scene in the first novel, this time with added slapstick, and it did not engage me.

Also, the cast of secondary characters felt less well-developed this time out, with the exception of Anya's witchy best friend Karen, and Anya's relationship with her boyfriend, Brian, gets short shrift. Also, Bickle made some choices with regard to the climax of the narrative that made it feel somewhat underdeveloped—specifically, moving the final confrontation to an alternate plane meant that much of the tension felt secondhand.

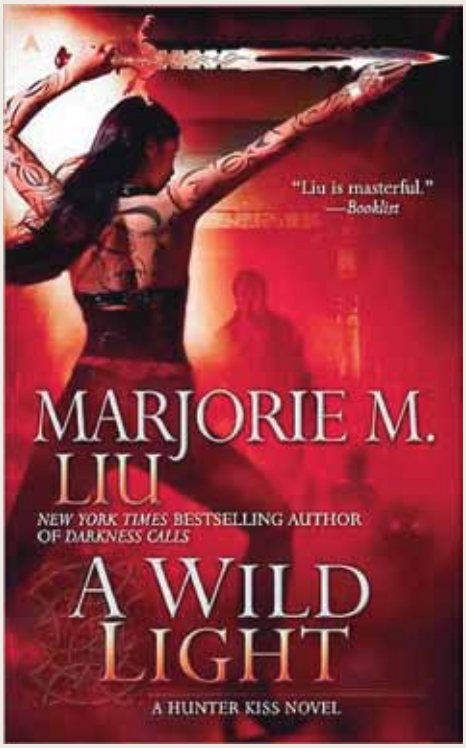
It may seem from the above that I did not like this novel, but that would be entirely untrue. *Sparks* remains a charming and inventive read—it merely suffers a little by comparison to *Embers*, as it has a lot of first-novel flaws that *Embers* avoided.

In *Sparks*, we rejoin Anya recovering from her injuries and heartbreaks of the previous book, as she is about to become embroiled in yet another deadly mystery. Called upon to investigate an apparent arson murder, she is faced with the inescapable conclusion that her victim died by spontaneous human combustion (insert Spinal Tap or Charles Dickens joke here)—which, of course, does not exist. And so is hard to explain to her bosses.

Soon, she discovers that the death is linked to the disappearance of a number of ghosts, and comes to suspect that both are being instituted by a confidence woman who now runs a local television ministry. The question that confronts her is, how can she collect enough evidence to convict the woman when the testimony of ghosts is insufficient to obtain a warrant.

Meanwhile, *Dark Oracle* takes place in an entirely different (although still modern-day) setting. Williams's protagonist (and yes, it amuses me to use two names when discussing different work by the same person) for this series is a retired behavioral analyst and Tarot card reader named Tara Gilian, who left the FBI after an encounter with a serial killer left her scarred and traumatized. But her backstory problems don't stop there, because Tara is also the scion of an ancient order of women oracles, one of whom wants her dead.

As the story opens, Tara has resigned from humanity, but the vagaries of adventure novels dictate that she will not be able to keep herself away from danger long. She's soon recruited to seek a missing scientist who disappeared



while working on an experimental particle accelerator. This kicks off a fast-paced spy vs. spy plotline, as FBI agents double-cross one another, and mystical powers with their own strong agendas come into play—and Tara finds she must both protect the scientist's scientist daughter and deal with her own developing affections for her accidental partner, who happens to be a hard-nosed skeptic.

Of course, there are double- and triple-crosses as Tara has to avoid implacable killers, seek allies, and keep herself and those under her protection alive—all the while solving the case of the missing physicist.

Dark Oracle is a lot of fun. It has some structural rockiness, in that the timing of many events seems extremely convenient, and I can feel the author's hand a bit too much in who dies and lives—but it's a pleasant novel, with a new angle on urban fantasy (no werewolves or vampires, huzzah! And some fun with particle physics that almost justifies an SF tag.) The plot suffers from that arbitrariness mentioned above, and there's a bit too much of a sense of "and then this happened, and then this happened," but overall, it's not a bad first novel.

One thing I enjoy about Bickle/Williams is that her protagonists do not conform to the brittle, mouthy urban fantasy stereotype that I find so irritating. They have real problems, and not all of their issues are provoked by their tendency to run off at the mouth. Also, Bickle/Williams (a criminologist) is obviously knowledgeable about law and criminal enforcement, so her stories ring more true than many urban fantasy narratives. Her cops worry about the chain of evidence and warrants and not looking like an idiot in the media.

I find this satisfying.

Moving from debuting to established authors, Marjorie M. Liu's ***A Wild Light*** (Ace, mass-market paperback, 320 pages, $7.99, ISBN 978-0441019014) is the third in her Hunter Kiss series.

Maxine Kiss, Liu's protagonist, wears five demons tattooed on her body. Her mission in life is to protect others from supernatural creatures who want to break through into our world and consume it. She's surrounded in her quest by the usual assortment of allies both mundane and supernatural, including a paranormally powerful beau, one Grant Cooperon, who is one of the better boyfriends in the world of paranormal fiction—neither a jerk nor a pushover.

This seems on the surface to be a pretty bog-standard urban fantasy setup, and in fact... well, it is. Liu gets points for execution, though: Maxine is an engaging heroine, flawed and often confused by her role, and she manages not to be Buffy in Black Leather. She's aided in this by Liu's almost balladic writing style, which relies for its impact on repetition and rhythm.

What also sets this book apart is its emphasis on hard psychological verities. Liu's characters are triggery and defensive, and the plot unfolds with a surreal dream-logic inevitability.

I've often said that every author is only allowed one amnesia story, so we had each better make it good. This one is Liu's, and I think she's gotten good mileage out of it. ❧

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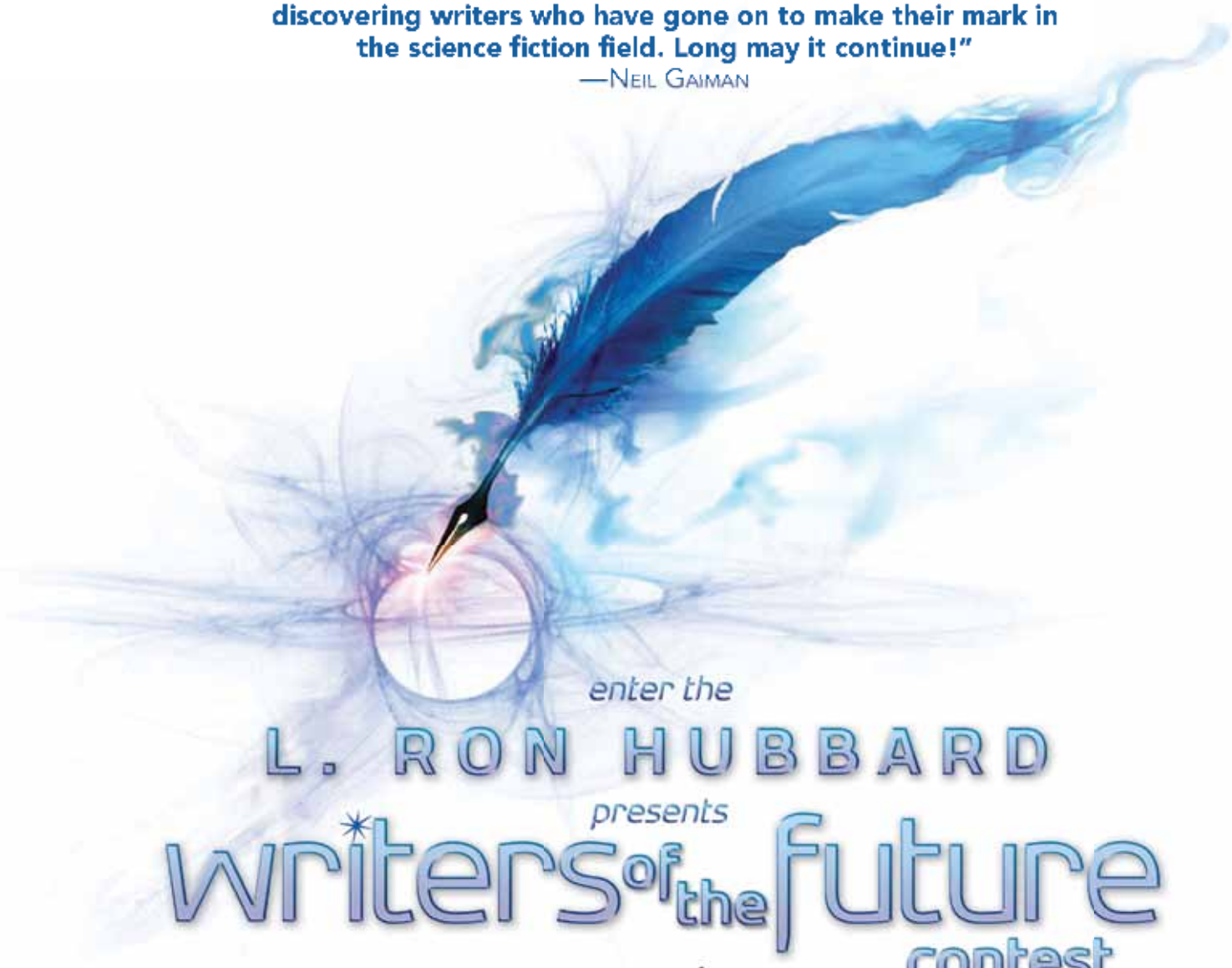

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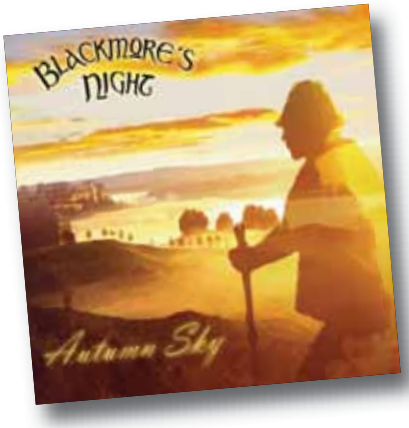

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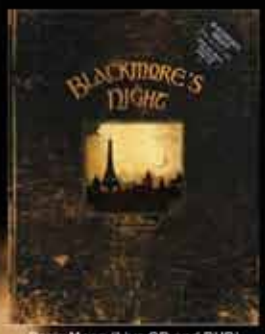
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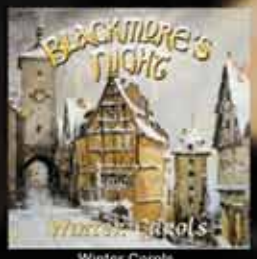
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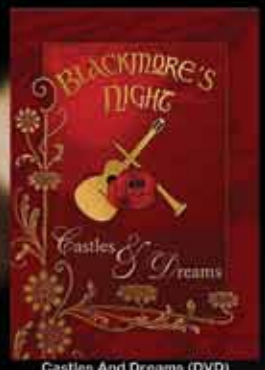
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